



BREAKING BARRIERS...

Tales of Action, Determination & Transformation



PREFACE

The compendium is more than a collection of stories; it is evidence to the resilience, courage and collective spirit of adolescent girls. It is not about impressive headlines or bringing reforms but about transformations led by adolescent girls of Adivasi and Dalit community, who stands at the last miles of the society. This compendium, *Breaking Barriers: Tales of Action, Determination & Transformation*, records their remarkable journeys as they rise above age-old challenges to shape out new possibilities for themselves and their communities.

These narratives drawn from the ACEH (Agents of Change for Empowerment and Health) program implemented by Living Farms, supported by Action Child Aid, reflect a journey of transformation, turning constraints into opportunities, silence into advocacy, and vulnerability into leadership.

At Living Farms, we believe that real change emerges when those at the grassroots are empowered with analysing issues critically, providing opportunities, knowledge, skills and confidence. Our mission has always been to nurture the roots of food and nutrition security among Adivasi communities, helping them reclaim their dignity and heritage. Through PLA (Participatory Learning & Action) in the ACEH programme, we have tried to enable adolescent girls to analyse issues critically, identify & prioritise their problems, prepare strategy, taking actions and have witnessed the immense potential of collective action. This process has driven adolescent girls to confront deep-rooted social barriers, lead dialogues on health and nutrition and take decisive steps toward an equitable future.

Each story in this compendium highlights a unique victory; girls returning to school against all odds, challenging the stigma of menstruation, stopping early marriage, leading cleanliness drives, advocating for their rights at different forums and participating in Gramsabhas. Through their efforts, these young change makers are not only shaping their destinies but are also reimagining the social narratives of gender and opportunity. They have not only redefined their identities but have also inspired their families and communities to reimagine the future.


We hope these stories inspire you as they have inspired us.

Let this compendium remind us all that when we invest in the potential of our youth, particularly our girls, we ignite a spark that has the power to illuminate entire societies.

Living Farms

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the adolescent girls involved in the program whose determination and commitment serve as a motivation of hope and inspiration for us all. This compendium would not have been possible without the active participation of our vibrant community members, whose insights have enriched our narrative. We are particularly thankful to the Kishori Sathis, Block Coordinators of ACEH program, whose generous effort and hard labour have made the project close to the desired objective. We again extend our heartfelt gratitude to the generous donor ACA (Action Child Aid), whose unwavering support has been instrumental in bringing this compilation of success stories to real. Our sincere appreciation also goes to the Anganwadi workers, ASHAs, CRPs and other frontline workers whose tireless efforts and commitment to empowering adolescent girls truly make a difference.



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As Priyanka wore her school uniform, she looked herself in the mirror, the sight left her misty-eyed.

A torrent of emotions ran deep inside her, the joy of joining her friends in her way to the school was no less than emerging victorious in a hard-fought battle. After six months of absence from the school, she is on her way again. The abandoned dreams and wishes have found wings again.

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A STAND OF SOLIDARITY

Priyanka's family consists of her father, mother, three sisters and two brothers. The family lives in Alisingh village of Nuagarh block of Gajapati District. The family of eight members had always an arduous path to tread as they struggled to eke out a living. Agriculture was the main source of income and her father would shift to daily wage or any work available nearby to supplement the earnings. But it was always a drop in the bucket and their financial condition was on the decline. Poverty compelled her father to perceive education of girls as a burden. Remaining absent from school was nothing unusual for Priyanka as her father would instruct her to do the household chores and assist others more often than not. Whenever Priyanka insisted to go to school, her father would respond with a very strong voice saying "You are a girl. You will get nothing from education. You are destined to marry and go to another family where your skills in household works will count. Further, this is a large family and I can't afford your schooling at all". Finally, he dealt a blow one day by saying Priyanka would not go to school from the next day. Priyanka found arguing was like fighting for a lost cause as her father's decision was final and binding. For days she cried, but then surrendering to the circumstances appeared the best option to her.

Whenever Priyanka insisted to go to school, her father would respond with a very strong voice saying "You are a girl. You will get nothing from education."

Alisingh was one of the villages in which ACEH (Agent of Change for Empowerment and Health) program supported by ACA (Action Child Aid) Denmark was implemented by Living Farms. As a key component of this programme, Kishori Dal was formed by a trained Kishori Sathi (appointed by Living Farms). All the adolescent girls became members

of this group. The main objective of constituting such a group was to make the adolescent girls conscious about the issues they were facing and to develop their leadership qualities and skills to negotiate the issues successfully. A total of 19 meetings under the PLA (Participatory Learning and Action) Cycle were designed in a way that adolescent girls would be able to identify and prioritise their problems, prepare strategy, implement the actions and evaluate their action.

The Kishori Sathi convinced Priyanka's parents and she too became a member of the group. During the fourth meeting in the sequel, a case study was discussed in the meeting. It was about an adolescent girl who was forced to stop her studies to get married at the age of 16 years only. Subsequently the girl suffered a lot of trauma due to early marriage and finally succumbed to complications. Priyanka correlated her situation with the sufferings of the girl cited in the story and became restless. Finding an amicable ambience in the form of Kishori Dal, one day Priyanka shared her grief and concerns over her future. The despondency she was undergoing was pushing her towards a depressing state day by day. The group assured her of all possible support and inspired her to take decisive step as inaction would yield no result. Priyanka found solace and strength from this impactful discussion.

The very next day, the Kishori Dala visited her house along with Kishori Sathi and initiated the discussion with her father. Backed by the band of girls, Priyanka gained confidence and requested her father not to stop her education as he wanted to complete her matriculation. Priyanka's father adopted a belligerent approach and stated that education for her daughter was not as useful as doing the household chores. The discussion prolonged for more than one hour. Equipped with the persuasive skills, Priyanka along with other adolescent girls cited many incidences in which girls had become successful with



education and suffered to death due to early marriage. Finally, they made her father realize the essence of education. The fruitful discussion ended with a positive nod from her father as he smilingly assured that he would not stop her from going to school and continue her studies.

Even if during formation of group it was discussed that unity was strength and collective effort was essential to deal with bigger issues, the adolescent girls were overwhelmed to witness the outcome of their collective efforts in convincing Priyanka's father. As Priyanka has found a second chance to continue her studies, the group is now brimming with confidence to take up any kind of issues that affects the adolescent girls in their village.



NOT A GAME

BUT A GAME CHANGER

It was on 20th June 2023, the Rampur village witnessed wonders happening around. The day marked the beginning of a new era for girls and heralded a gender sensitive society in the ensuing time. It was for the first time the adolescent girls played a cricket match. The two teams that played the match were least bothered about the outcome of the match. For them it was a moment of creating their own identity which was unseen, ignored and suppressed for years.



The state of girls was no better than vegetable existence in Rampur, a village under Sabarpali GP of R. Udaygiri block. The myth that male child is superior and girls are inferior was prevalent and pervasive. The adolescent boys would be acknowledged as assets and girls were considered as burdens. The adolescent girls used to lead a life within the confines of four walls. Their interest, opinion and wishes never mattered for anyone. Such prejudicial practices fuelled by myths and misconception widened the inequality between girls and boys, and pushed the girls towards a flummoxed future. Under sheer neglect and negation, the adolescent girls had resigned to the fact. Education, free movement and becoming independent were more like dreams than ambitions to them. Manisha, Rita and Tulasa watched their brothers playing cricket everyday and would rue the reality of being a girl.

With the formation of Trirasmi Kishori Dala under ACEH Programme, the existence and identity of adolescent girls have changed for better. It was a Herculean task for Kishori Sathi to convince the parents to send their adolescent girls to the meeting. But she relentlessly persuaded the parents and ensured that all adolescent girls became members of the group. The girls too were excited to realize that the group was to be governed and managed by them. The regular meetings and trainings saw the girls going from strength to strength. The group made them feel their worth, they began to believe that they must take action to effect the changes they wished to see.

During one meeting, while sharing their wishes, Manisha and Rita said “We wish we were boys. We want to play cricket, but we can’t as we are girls”. This sharing was picked by the Kishori Sathi and the group underwent a brainstorming discussion over “Why can’t girls play cricket”. After insightful discussion, the group decided that there would be nothing better than starting with a game to prove a point.

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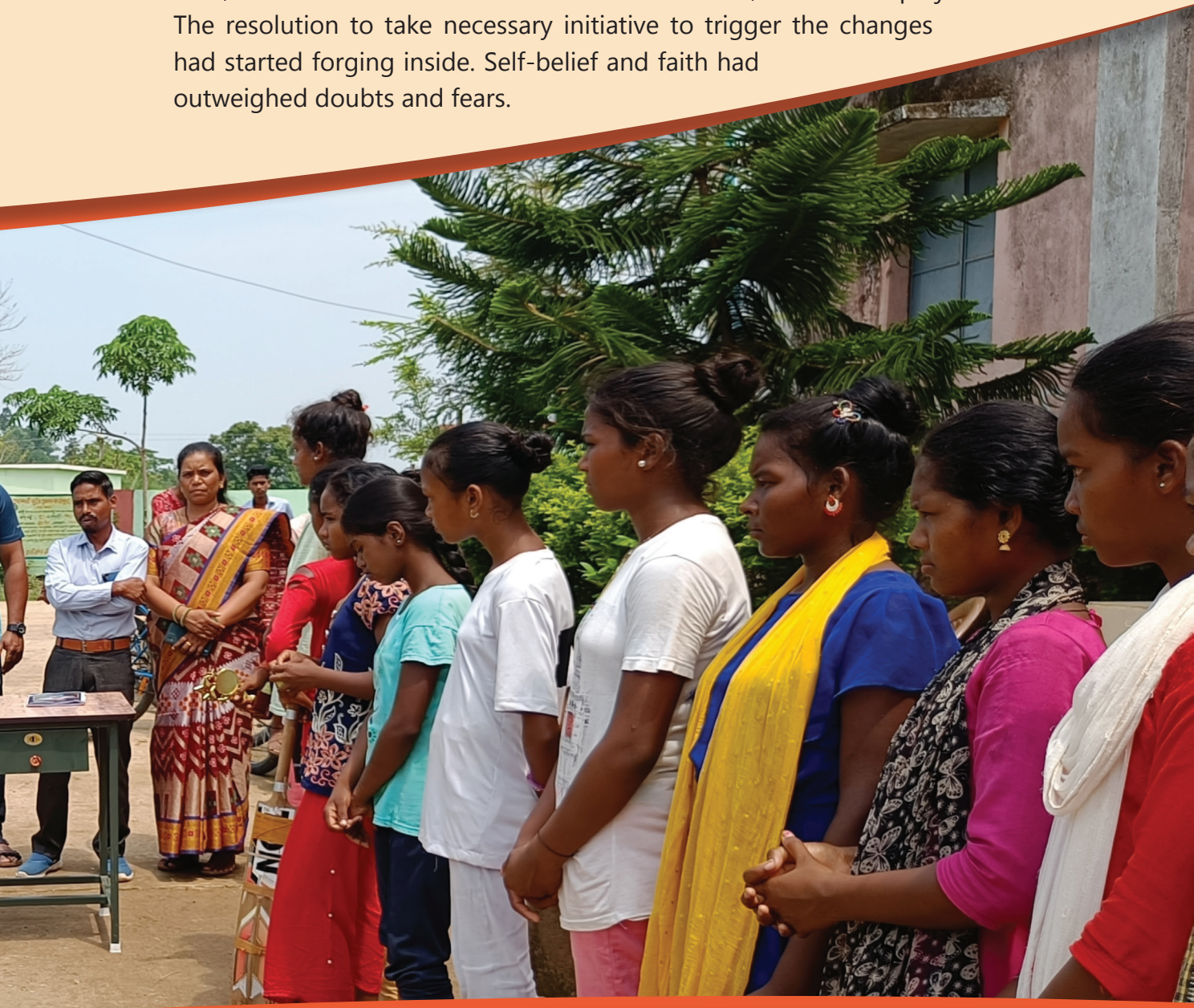
As they started preparing for the match, the news spread like wildfire. Some parents discouraged them, some laughed at them, but the girls remained stoic and defiant. Their enthusiasm and eagerness drew the attention of the boys who extended their co-operation by providing them cricket kit and getting the field ready for the match.

The Trirasmī Kishorī Dala invited the Sarpanch and Block Programme Manager of Odisha Livelihoods Mission on the occasion. Finally on 20th June 2023 the coin was tossed up and the match kick-started. The hands that were more accustomed to hold the broom and accomplish the household chores struggled to grip the bat and ball, but inside the mind the adolescent girls had developed an indomitable spirit. The villagers gathered around the field. As the boys kept on clapping to motivate the



girls, the parents could not stop their hands too.

The match continued for two hours. The girls fell on the ground many times while bowling, fielding and taking a run, but they only fell to rise again with more determination. The mute spectators of yester years had taken the centre stage that day. As the match completed, they hugged each other, Manisha and Rita could not stop their tears rolling out. By that time, the match had set their minds free from fear, shame and prejudices. The resolution to take necessary initiative to trigger the changes had started forging inside. Self-belief and faith had outweighed doubts and fears.





MENSTRUAL HYGIENE NO MORE A TABOO TOPIC

Bijayini Kishori Dala - a group comprising of adolescent girls is earning adulations from women and girls of Borikhal, a village under Kankubadi Gram Panchayat of Bissamcuttack, Rayagada. That the sanitary napkins will be easily available for women and adolescent girls may seem simple, but it underscores ceaseless efforts and determination of adolescent girls who with the support of Living Farms not only subdued the stigma associated with menstruation or topics associated, but more significantly convinced the adolescent girls and women that Menstrual Health and Hygiene is an important aspect of overall health.



Borikhal village is home to 30 Adivasi families who completely rely on agriculture to make ends meet. In a hilly terrain and in the absence of irrigation facilities, the yields of agriculture barely meet their subsistence level. Steeped in poverty, these families struggle for survival, and education for them is somewhat expensive and inaccessible. It is said that no girl in the village has ever made it to high school level, leave alone higher studies at colleges and universities.

Poverty coupled together with ignorance brings various maladies. During the implementation of ACEH (Agent of Change for Empowerment and Health) program in the village, it was found that adolescent girls and women did not pay due heed to Menstrual Health and Hygiene. Discussion on such issues were deliberately avoided by adolescent girls and women due to social taboo. If at all, these were discussed, those were confined to the four walls of the family and to female members only. To say the least, problems and issues were whispered, but solutions were never thought of.

Under some strategic and systematic intervention, the Kishori Sathi appointed under the ACEH Project held the first meeting under PLA (Participatory Learning and Action) cycle. In this meeting the issues like health, nutrition and leadership development were brain-stormed. The adolescent girls were infused with the knowledge to reflect over their situation concerning their health, nutrition, education and other important aspects. They realized the importance of their active involvement and more importantly understood the essence of collective effort to solve problems more effectively. Under the guidance of Kishori Sathi, they formed "Bijayini Kishori Dala", a group



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comprising of adolescent girls of the village ageing between 10 to 19 years.

During the second meeting under the PLA Cycle, the adolescent girls identified the challenges before them at family level, community level and society level. In the third meeting of PLA Cycle, the adolescent girls understood the malnutrition cycle and decided to break the cycle by implementing various strategies. The group observed that the adolescent girls were using unhygienic clothes instead of sanitary napkins as the latter was not readily available in the village, and out of shyness they could not tell their family members to buy sanitary napkins for them. Maintaining cleanliness during menstruation period was one of the immediate actions the group decided to take.

Having convinced that Menstrual Health was an integral part of overall health, the group decided to take initiative to create awareness among other adolescent girls and women in their village and motivated them to maintain hygiene and use sanitary napkins during menstruation cycle. The topic was sensitive and involved change in mindset and approach.

However, the challenge before Bijayini Kishori Dala was to make Sanitary Napkins readily available in the village which involved cost implications as purchasing Sanitary Napkins from open market would cost them more. After series of discussion, they unanimously decided to create a fund and each member contributed Rs. 10/- to the fund. Ranjita, Babita and Sanjukta, three adolescent girls who prior to the formation of Bijayini Kishori Dala used to be shy, hesitant and reluctant village girls exhibited extraordinary sense of leadership qualities after the PLA meetings. They took the responsibility to approach ASHA for supply of Sanitary Napkins at subsidized rates. They convinced the ASHA about the need of Sanitary Napkins in the village and the ASHA started supplying the napkins from the next month.

Now, not only the adolescent girls are using Sanitary Napkin during menstruation cycle, but also other women in the village have started opting for it. This small initiative taken by the adolescent girls has created a ripple effect as adolescent girls of nearby villages have started using sanitary napkins and have set their sight to form a group to emulate activities of Bijayini Kishori Dal. The change has just begun...

Adolescent Girls Crusade For Cleanliness

Grappling with issues like poverty, unemployment and lack of livelihood opportunity, the villagers of Kahnuguda viewed illness and ailments as one of the worst nightmares. Situated in the hinterlands of Kashipur block of Rayagada district, which once gained dubious distinction for starvation deaths, Kahnuguda is a tribal village. Lack of nutritional food and unhygienic practices used to put their lives at stake as vector borne, water borne and other diseases loomed large. In such a backdrop, the cleanliness drive undertaken by adolescent girls of the village is a giant leap forward in the right direction.

The burden of illness is insurmountable for poverty-stricken people as it not only enervates physically but also impoverishes them further. Diseases like Malaria, Jaundice, Diarrhoea and other gastrointestinal issues continued to affect the villagers. The formation of “Kalyani Kishori Dal” under the ACEH Programme has turned out to be a saviour as it started working on the root causes of such diseases- hygiene and cleanliness.

The Kishori Sathi appointed under ACEH programme, implemented by Living Farms visited the village frequently and after developing a cordial relation with the adolescent girls formed Kalyani Kishori Dal which has now 30 members in it. The meetings conducted adopting PLA (Participatory Learning and Action) approach inspired the adolescent girls to contemplate about the circumstances and causes that hinders the development of their village and to chalk out strategies to overcome those. By the third meeting under PLA cycle, these adolescent girls collectively decided to initiate cleanliness and hygiene drive to root out causes that resulted in health issues.

It was on an appointed morning braced with brooms and hoes; they assembled together in the village. The villagers were stunned to witness such an unprecedented sight and anxiously watched what the girls of their village are going to do. As the girls started to clean the village, the youth came forward and lent a helping hand as they realized the efforts



were meant for a larger cause. They also decided to clean the village at least once in every month.

This initiative not only helped in keeping the village clean, but on a larger front persuaded the villagers to adopt cleanliness and hygiene at individual as well as collective levels. The incidence of water borne and vector borne diseases will definitely start declining with such efforts and the villagers' health condition will change for better.

It is worth mentioning here that the adolescent girls have exhibited exceptional understanding of the issues and extraordinary ability in taking measures for targeted outcomes by just the third meeting under PLA cycle. And beyond doubt, it is evident that the girls will come up with much more actions and initiatives collectively by the end of completion of PLA cycle which consists of 19 such meetings.

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PLA (Participatory Learning & Action) Cycle At A Glance

PLA Meeting	Key Objectives
1	Importance of collective action- Group is the way to go
2	Assessment of situation and social barriers
3	Understanding intergenerational malnutrition cycle and learning "adolescent age is right time" to break the malnutrition cycle
4	Identifying problems and prioritizing those. Leadership development
5	Finding immediate, underlying and basic causes of problems and solutions
6	Developing strategies targeting solutions and undertaking responsibilities implement strategies
7	Understanding food groups, their functions, minimum dietary diversity and balanced diet
8	Knowing the cause and effects of anemia and importance of iron rich foods
9	Learning about the good practices and bad practices and their impact on health and nutrition. Promoting good practices
10	Understanding gender, identifying gender discrimination
11	Understanding the importance of maintaining good hygiene
12	Understanding importance of cleanliness during menstruation
13	Learning about schemes, services and entitlements for adolescent girls and empowering adolescent girls to access those
14	Understanding to break silence when it is necessary and taking right decision at right time
15	Augmenting confidence of girls to take charge of own life and understanding the importance of strong commitment
16	Providing an environment for adolescent girls to discover their dreams of life and making them realize that dream can come true
17	Understanding the incidence of sexual exploitation and how to prevent it
18	Learning and listing positive practices to be success in life
19	Evaluation of the cycle by sharing experiences, impacts of activities and planning for future

A Good Beginning Is Never Too Late

Gita wends her way to the college more assiduously than before, her passion for education has compounded as she has found a purpose, her life now holds promises of better prospects. She has realized that it is necessary to break the culture of silence to shape her future. The girl who once dropped out of college, now numbers among few girls who maintain 100% attendance in classes. The transformation of her attitude and approach is an inspiring tale for other girls who bury their dreams as pressure from family weighs heavy and who never realize that submissive silence shatters more dreams.

Gita, 17 years of age, lives with her mother and elder brother in Baradaguda, a small tribal village under Bissam Cuttack block of Rayagada District. Alike other families in the village, Gita's family also relied on agriculture and forest produces. However, the income generated from these always fell short to meet the bare needs of the family. The family embraced every opportunity to work as daily wage labourers which too were rare to add up to the family income. The untimely demise of her father years back, made the family vulnerable economically and Gita gradually became shy and submissive. As household chores and additional income were perceived dearer to studies, Gita became irregular in attending classes. Her regular absence from school soon drifted into her becoming of a permanent drop-out. She bade adieu to her studies at higher secondary level.

It was no surprise that Gita's mother and brother started to search for decent proposals to get her married when she was hardly 17 years. Finally, they found a match for her and her marriage was all but fixed. Gita was left with no choices; she has to submissively accept what her mother and elder brother had decided for her. She was even not consulted once, her opinions never mattered...an adult girl was considered to be a burden to the family. Her socialization was affected to an exceeding extent as she stopped going to college, and gradually she started isolating herself from her college going friends. The apprehension of ill effects of early marriage bothered her, but she had no one to share her concerns and thoughts with.

When Ramadevi Kishori Dal, a group of adolescent girls was formed in the village, Gita joined the group reluctantly after repeated persuasion by Kishori Sathi (under ACEH programme). The adolescent girls convened a meeting every month in which issues of health, nutrition, gender discrimination, status of schemes and services meant for them were discussed. These meetings were conducted adopting PLA (Participatory Learning and Action) approach and were facilitated through games, songs, storytelling, picture cards, activities, demonstration etc. In subsequent meetings, the adolescent girls discussed about major issues like malnutrition cycle, benefit of working together, balanced diet, existing barriers for adolescent girls in the society, good practices and behaviour, menstrual hygiene and anaemia. The meetings provided easeful ambience to the adolescent girls to share their concerns. Gita gathered confidence as she realized that the group and the Kishori Sathi would stand by her. During one of such meetings, she expressed her concerns that continued to haunt her for months. She said "I do not want to marry now. I know, at the age of 17-18, I am not physically and mentally matured for marriage. My health and mental condition will deteriorate after marriage



and my life will be at high risk being prone to anaemia and other diseases. But I do not know how to oppose my mother and elder brother as they take all decisions in my home". The Ramadevi Kishori Dal took the matter seriously and asked Gita to ensure her mother's participation in the next parents' meeting.

Gita went home and persuaded her mother to attend the parents' meeting. Her mother could not deny to Gita's repeated pleas and she attended the meeting accompanied by Gita. Strategically, the Kishori Sathi emphasized on the harmful effects of early marriage during the discussion. After the meeting, Gita was advised by Kishori Sathi and other adolescent girls to speak to her mother that day about dropping the idea of her marriage at a tender age. They motivated her to be courageous and confident as it was a matter of her life.

After reaching home, Gita broke free. She pleaded to her mother in a very polite way citing that early marriage could pose serious threats to her life. She also asked her mother if she wanted to see her child (Gita) in distress after marriage. Gita's mother became emotional and she started to doubt the decision of Gita's marriage. The bad effects of early marriage which were discussed during parents' meeting began to reverberate in her mind. During this time her brother arrived and was shocked to hear about Gita's pleading. He said it was not possible as the marriage has been fixed. For him it was a matter honour and reputation of the family. Gita's mother interrupted her brother and said "Son, now I have understood, we were so much self-oriented that we hardly cared to take the opinion of Gita about her marriage. And in a way we are not cancelling the marriage, we are postponing it till she decides it is right time for her marriage. Let her study like her friends, let her give an opportunity to prove herself". Gita's brother too was convinced that marriage against her wishes would not bring happiness.

After few days Gita went to her college and was excited to learn that she could continue her studies from where she left. She is now studying hard to make up for the lost time. It is undeniable that the courage and conviction Gita exhibited to stop early marriage will inspire other girls to psyche up and stand up for themselves.

Adding Verve And Vigour To VHND

There has been a seismic shift in observation of Village Health and Nutrition Day (VHND) since the last two months. In terms of participation, it is now fulfilling and accomplishing as adolescent girls are participating in the VHND with all enthusiasm and eagerness. Their active participation augurs well for the village as with better understanding and knowledge they are raising pertinent issues related to health and nutrition and drawing the attention of health care representatives.

Just few months back, the adolescent girls of Renga village under Kashipur block had not even the faintest idea about VHND, most of them could hardly tell what VHND stood for. Even if the VHND was supposed to include pregnant women, lactating mothers, children and adolescent girls, it was quite ironical that none of the adolescent girls attended the meeting once. It is a matter of utter dismay that the Anganwadi worker, ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist), ANM (Auxiliary Nursing Midwifery) who were responsible to hold VHND never felt it necessary to invite the adolescent girls to the meeting. Unfortunately, the adolescent girls remained aloof of the services and facilities offered during VHND for years together right from the initiation of such event (VHND). To say the least, the community was made to believe that VHND was there for pregnant women and children.

It was two decades ago, the Kashipur block hit the headlines of media of national and international levels for quite wrong reasons. Starvation related deaths and lack of access to nutritional foods in the block brought infamy to the state. And with such an ignominious past, the efforts of adolescent girls to ensure VHND is conducted in letter and spirit is a significant stride.

As envisaged under some strategic intervention, Living Farms facilitated adolescent girls to form Kishori Dal and conducted PLA meeting with them under the ACEH Programme. The Kishori Sathi was entrusted with the responsibility to improve status of health, nutrition and leadership qualities of adolescent girls in the village who would then act as change agents in the village and vicinity. Forming a group comprising of all adolescent girls was the corner stone and key to the programme. After formation of the group,

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a series of meetings were conducted under the PLA (Participatory Learning and Action). During one such meeting, the Kishori Sathi initiated a discussion on VHND as it concerned health and nutrition of adolescent girls. While responding to Kishori Sathi on why they were not attending VHND, most of the girls shared that neither they knew that they were supposed to attend the meeting, nor they were invited by the ASHA or ANM as participants. The group realised the importance of their participation and the very next day met the AWW (Anganwadi Worker) and ASHA and expressed their interest in VHND. The ASHA and AWW assured to invite them in next the next VHND.

On the designated day three adolescent girls- Rajeswari Naik, Chukani Naik and Draupadi Naik attended the VHND and availed the services like weight measurement, height measurement and checking the haemoglobin count. They held discussion with the ANM, AWW and ASHA on nutritional issues and shared their suggestions too. They narrated their experience with adolescent girls of their group who found it very useful. Since then, most of



the girls are attending the VHND. After check up, it has been found that few adolescent girls' haemoglobin level is below 10. These girls are now taking IFOL (Iron & Folic Acid) tablets and are on specific diet as suggested by the frontline health workers.

These adolescent girls will not only grow healthy but also will acquire knowledge about health and nutrition which will be immensely beneficial for them, their family and the community at large. The ASHA, AWW and ANM have taken a leaf from this experience and are planning to include adolescent girls in VHND at other villages as well. They are now convinced that participation of adolescent girls will add new dimension and value to VHND and will go a long way in meeting the purpose of it.



Making Things

Happen-The Unrestrained

If ignorance, apathy and social neglect jeopardised their lives for years and fettered their freedom, then the adolescent girls of Urlajodi village, equipped with knowledge, and through collective action have turned the tides in their favour. There has been a sea-change in the scenario as of now.

The adolescent girls of Urlajodi village under Bissam Cuttack block were busy with trivial affairs of life. While most of them were solely engaged in household chores and assisting parents in farming, few of them were luckier enough to go to the nearby school. Being girls, they were not supposed to take part in any meetings or developmental activities. They were never conscious and concerned about health, hygiene and nutrition even if those had direct impact on their well-being.

Just one year back when Kishori Sathi approached them for a meeting, they were surprised as it sounded quite unusual to be invited for some meeting. Initially few girls joined in the meeting and formed a group and named it “Kasturba Kishori Dala”. As the other girls saw that meetings were conducted regularly, they too joined the group. Since then, it did not take much of time when all girls of the village became members of the adolescent group.

The Kishori Sathi appointed by Living Farms under the ACEH Programme supported by ACA (Action Child Aid) helped them to critically reflect on various issues related to health, nutrition, gender equality, leadership development through PLA (Participatory Learning & Action) meetings. Adolescent girls held the meetings twice a month on regular basis. They identified and prioritised their problems, prepared strategy and action plan to address the problems and implemented them at their own.

As the meetings under PLA progressed, the adolescent girls started realising the importance of attending VHND which was directly related to health and nutrition. Earlier they had an impression that VHNDs were meant for pregnant women and children. But after attending PLA meetings and frequent discussion on government services, they realised that VHND was

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an important platform for adolescent girls. Even if they wanted to participate in VHND, it was not possible for them as most of them would be busy in agricultural and other activities, and the rest would be at school.

The Kasturba Kishori Dal made a thorough discussion on the issue and decided to approach the appropriate authorities to conduct VHND on holidays. The next day, they met the Sarpanch and shared their concern in a convincing manner. The Sarpanch appreciated their suggestion and advised them to meet the CMO of Bissam Cuttack who was authorised to change the VHND date. Realising the importance of participation of adolescent girls in the VHND, the Sarpanch too accompanied them to the Block Headquarters Hospital to meet the CMO. After prolonged wait, they met the CMO and requested him to change the VHND date. The girls were meticulous in their approach and handed over a written application to the CMO. The CMO has assured that he would do something in this regard to ensure participation of adolescent girls in the VHND.

The very fact that visiting the offices like Block Office, CDPO Office used to be a dream for them before one year is symbolic of their confinement both mental and physical. But at present, their visit to the Panchayat office and Block Headquarters Hospital to meet the CMO to change the date of VHND speaks volumes of the changes taken place inside them. Now they are informed, united and willing to take action, and are in a way “unrestrained”.





Taking Charge Of Things That Matter

The adolescent girls of Dengaguda village are now calling the shots. From mute spectators, they have transformed into active participants. They have exhibited exuberant skills in taking the lead, taking the control of things that impact their lives. This transformation in their temperament and approach will not only change their lives for better, but also will be key to the overall well-being of their community.

Nutrition has been a challenge for girls and women in Dengaguda village under Dudukabahal GP of Kashipur block. Even though malnutrition and anaemia were quite common in the village, the girls and women continued to suffer as access to nutritional food and supplements were far from reach. Poverty and misery made them vulnerable on many fronts.

Supported by Action Child Aid, Living Farms implemented the ACEH Programme in the village. As the adolescent girls formed a group and participated in the PLA meeting Cycle, they were able to identify various issues like nutrition, hygiene, health and well-being. The meetings also helped them to strategise meticulously to address the issues and execute those strategies effectively.

As the adolescent girls formed a group and participated in the PLA meeting Cycle, they were able to identify various issues like nutrition, hygiene, health and well-being.

During one of the meetings, it was discussed that even if nutrition garden by the side of their house would be highly beneficial, it was not possible for all the girls as sufficient land was not there or the land was not suitable to grow plants. The group came up with the idea to develop nutrition garden collectively and took a patch of land on lease. All the members of the adolescent group prepared beds and planted vegetable seeds like amaranthus, okra, brinjal, beans, cow pea, bitter gourd, pumpkin, bottle gourd, kalmi sag, cucumber etc. In this, they found a solution to meet the requirement of nutrition.

Moving further, in order to upscale the nutrition garden and ensure continuity, they decided to establish a seed bank to preserve the seeds. Now two girls are in-charge of the seed bank, they preserve seeds and maintain records.

That the adolescent girls of a tribal village within the age of 10 to 19 years have conceptualized a collective nutrition garden and set it up within no



time along with seed bank, is no mean feat. Their active participation in VHND and other meetings portrays the shift in their attitude. They have shun being victims of circumstances by taking things under control.

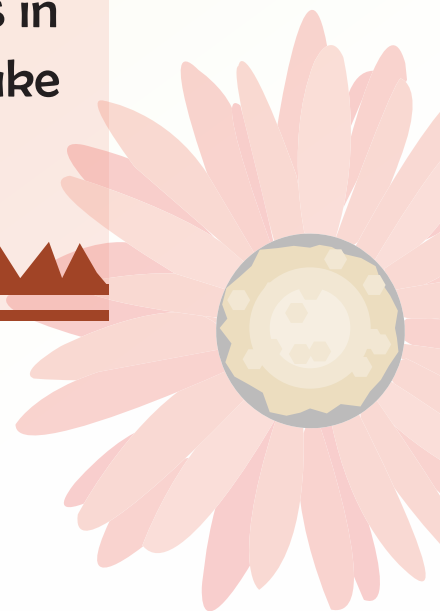
These initiatives of developing a nutrition garden and seed bank collectively have been so striking and appealing that girls of other villages have shown interest to set up nutrition gardens collectively.



A Spark In The Dark



Discrimination on the basis of gender is an age-old practice. The bias that females are inferior is deep-rooted in the society. As it is said “Bad habits die hard”, it will take a lot of time and effort to change the psyche. But in Padmapur village, the beginning has already been made. A group of determined adolescent girls have shown great audacity to brave the odds. They are resolute and relentless in their approach to break-free and stake their claim for gender equality.



Padmapur is a small village in R. Udaygiri block. Alike most of the rural areas, the girls were subject to discrimination on many fronts. Be it education, participation or even moving out of the house, they underwent restrictions and restraints all over. Even speaking loudly or gossiping with friends outside were considered as offence. It affected their quality of life significantly. As they had not realized the essence and

importance to participate in the VHND (Village Health and Nutrition Day) and Advika meetings, they usually did not attend those, and resultantly could not access the services meant for them.

The sole purpose of playing “Kabaddi” was to influence the opinion of the community by making them realize that they needed to be treated evenly, their wishes mattered too and provided with the opportunity they could prove themselves at par with boys.

The rolling out of ACEH Programme by Living Farms served as a silver lining for the adolescent girls. As they formed a group and participated in the meetings under PLA Cycle, they became aware of key elements like health, nutrition and more importantly gender equality. It was a crucial phase of awakening for them as they not only became capable of analysing how gender inequality had reduced them to hostage of fortune, but quite significantly they were coming up with strategies that could result in desired changes.

They began to believe that subtle beginnings could turn out to be significant steps in the passage of time with consistent and concerted efforts. As a stepping stone, they picked the issue of restriction over their mobility and playing games. Emblematically they decided to play “Kabaddi” which was often considered as a masculine game. The sole purpose of playing

“Kabaddi” was to influence the opinion of the community by making them realize that they needed to be treated evenly, their wishes mattered too and provided with the opportunity they could prove themselves at par with boys.

Initially as the girls requested the permission of parents to play the game, most of the parents denied and some even scolded their daughters. The adolescent girls then changed their approach and visited each house forming a group. They would never mind how much time it took to convince the parents, but they would not leave the house before ensuring a confirmation of participation.

They made a conscious effort to inform about the match not only in their village, but also in the nearby villages. The field was crowded with visitors including their parents, villagers and adolescent girls from their village as well as neighbouring village. As the game continued, they were encouraged with clapping and whistles. The parents too enjoyed the match thoroughly and clapped at their daughters.

Although the game continued for few hours, the confidence it instilled among the girls to overcome the odds will last forever. The girls not only have planned to organise sports for adolescent girls of their village, but also to invite girls of other villages to take part. Their journey from shy and submissive girls to strong, persuasive agent of change for gender equality has just begun.



It's Never Too Late

The incidences of drop-out of girls in rural areas are higher as compared to boys. Abrupt withdrawal of girls from schools to look after younger siblings and assist in household chores or even to work as a daily wager is quite common and preferred choice for parents. They often fail to understand the value of education and all-round development that take place at school in the formative years of girls. Dropping out is a decision taken in haste, but its ill-effects are far-reaching and last for years, and even for lifetime for such girls.



Minati lives in the village Renga of Kashipur Block. Her family consists of her parents and a younger brother. Alike other families in the village, their family too was an agrarian subsistence family. With less land area, the meagre produces from agriculture was quite insignificant to meet the mounting demands of the family. He would work as a daily wage labourer to suffice to the income. However, as such income generating opportunities were scarce, the misery continued to haunt him. He finally decided to move to Kerala as better wages were offered there. One day he broke the news to Minati that they were leaving for Kerala where she would take care of her younger brother as both the parents will go to work. Minati was literally awestruck with the news as she was about to appear in the Class-VIII examination. Her dream to complete the matriculation and study at the college was shattered in no time. She wept and requested her father not to leave the village. But the financial obscurity of the family weighed heavier on her tears and wishes. They left for Kerala and Minati became a drop-out.

It was after one and half years, the family returned to the village. Minati by then had grown in height but had shrunk deep down. Her parents never asked her if she wanted to go to school and she too had lost interest in studies. She had realized that it would be hard for her to cope up with studies after a prolonged gap, and quite harder under the circumstances that her friends of Class-VIII would be in Class-X then. Deep down, she had lost her confidence and had developed shyness and shame. Everyday she would watch children of her village marching towards the school joyfully, but she could not gather the courage to join them.



Being an adolescent girl, Minati became a part of the adolescent group and attended the PLA meeting and other meetings organised in the group. The encouraging ambience of the group began to soothe her. She participated in regular discussion on health, nutrition, gender, early marriage and of course education. Some members even requested her to share her experience about Kerala. The Kishori Sathi appointed under ACEH project and the adolescent girls in the group made her realize that she had no control over leaving the village, however she could change her future by rejoining the school. They succeeded in convincing her that it was never too late to have education. However, Minati expressed that her father would not allow her to re-join school.

The Kishori Sathi appointed under ACEH project and the adolescent girls in the group made her realize that she had no control over leaving the village, however she could change her future by rejoining the school.

It was time for the group to act and intervene and stand in support of a group member in shaping her future.

The group visited her home and spoke to her father. With a circle of support around, Minati requested her father to allow her to go to school. Her father insisted on not sending Minati citing who would do the household chores. But the group advocated for Minati in such a manner that her father found no logic in keeping her abstained from education.

Minati was rejoiced to re-join the school. She was re-admitted in Class-VIII where she left. She enjoyed a larger friend circle as she had friends in Class-VIII and Class-X. Presently she is in Class-IX and just one more year away from materializing her dream of passing matriculation and studying at college level. Minati has realized that she had no control over where she had to start, but where she would finish will be solely her decision.

Adolescent Girls Pave The Way To Gramsabha

The villagers of Hazaridanga GP of Bissam Cuttack Block had no stake over the development plans. They were least interested and involved in attending Gramsabha in which the pattern, passage and pace of development of their villages were decided. Neither they had any realization of importance of their participation, nor there was any sincere attempt made to ensure their participation in these meetings. Gramsabha was organised quite contrary to its name, spirit and objectives of Panchayati Raj System. Even if it was “for the villagers”, it lacked the essences of “by the villagers” and “of the villagers” with almost no participation. The approach was absolutely “Top to down”.

As the villagers never found it essential to come out of their quotidian existence and present their issues and opinions, the villages lacked basic amenities. Most of the households had no toilet facilities and the villages had no community toilets. They would consider development activities as acts of sympathy by the government or authorities, but would never realize or raise demands for those.

Formed under the aegis of ACEH Programme, the adolescent groups in all most all the villages under the Hazaridanga Gram Panchayat were gaining prominence and going strength to strength. The adolescent girls under these groups were analysing the issues of their village and preparing action plans as well. The Jhansirani Kishori Dala in Ankulapadar village identified the issue of hygiene in their village and decided to attend the next Gramasabha which was scheduled to be held on 26th January with their demands. They wanted construction of toilets for households and community bathroom for women in their village.

As the adolescent groups reciprocate with each other and maintain high level of coordination, five adolescent groups from other villages decided to join them on 26th January with some pertinent demands concerning their villages.

Jhansirani Kishori Dala mobilised other adolescent groups of nearby villages





of Hazaridanga G.P. four to Five adolescent groups decided to attend Gramsabaha to raise their demands.

Making a fitting beginning on the Republic Day, the adolescent girl scripted history by representing their villages in the Gramsabha which was being held at the Panchayat Office. They presented their demands before the ward members, senior leaders of the villages, Sarapanch, Panchayat Samiti members and Panchayat executive officer.

They appeared prudent, prepared and maintained conviction and confidence while drawing the attention of the Gramsabha to their issues. The regular members of Gramsabha found it surprising to see the girls who used to be shy and submissive before months were representing their villages with a strong sense of understanding and leadership. They not only welcomed them but also assured them visible actions on their demands immediately. It is noteworthy that in another Gram Panchayat, Maa Laksmi Kishori Dala of Dilagudi village also attended the Gramsabha at Dangasorada G.P. office.

These adolescent girls have not only pioneered in representing their villages at Gramsabha with their demands, but more importantly paved the way for other villagers to participate in important meetings like Gramsabha and to raise their voices for rightful demands.

“ *The adolescent girls under these groups were analysing the issues of their village and preparing action plans as well.* ”

Standing together to challenge and change

In a scenario where practices like child marriage, withdrawal of girl child from school were pushing the future of girls towards a stygian dark, an adolescent group has emerged to challenge and to change the practices. They are lot more than just a glimmer of hope. Armed with knowledge and equipped with critical thinking, they have buckled up to prohibit the practices that endanger the lives of adolescent girls in the village.



Surrounded with verdant hills, Loba is purely a Tribal village in Rayagarh block and home to 250 families. The villagers depend on agriculture and daily wage for livelihoods. Even if the villagers led a simple and peaceful life, accruing poverty coupled together with ignorance and myth compelled them to take decisions that used rob the girls of their future. Withdrawal of girl child from school was on the rise. And it would beggar belief that child marriage too was a common practice which often resulted in early pregnancy, malnutrition, anaemia and even premature birth and death of the adolescent girls. It also prompted social maladies like domestic violence and exploitation of girls and affected their mental health.

The “Dibyajyoti Kishori Dala” a group of adolescent girls swung in to action as the news of a youth eloping with a girl spread. For rest of the villagers, it was just a piece of information, but for the adolescent group it called for immediate action. What had stirred their minds that day would just be a matter of gossip, if the group was not formed and if they did not undergo the training and discussion that had transformed them.

When the Kishori Sathi appointed under ACEH programme (implemented by Living Farms, supported by Action Child Aid, Denmark) visited the village to discuss with the adolescent girls to form an adolescent group at the

village, she found it very difficult to bring them to one place. Their parents and the girls themselves were reluctant to move outside of their hamlet for any meeting. It took more than a month of visits and follow-up visits to convince the parents and girls to congregate at one place for a cause. Finally adolescent girls (within the age of 10 to 19) of four hamlets of the village formed "Dibyajyoti Kishori Dala". In the passage of time, they developed a "We Feeling" and the meetings under the PLA Cycle took place twice in a month regularly. Under the guidance of Kishori Sathi, they discussed various issues related to their health, nutrition, gender discrimination, government schemes and rights. They developed understanding on malnutrition cycle, ill-effects of early marriage, school dropout, importance of accessing available services and schemes and all the things that affected their lives.

The meetings were not reduced to enhance their understanding only. These meetings under PLA Cycle enabled them to think critically, analyse, strategise and take action to effect the desired changes.

As the group took the elopement of a youth with a minor girl seriously, they visited the youth's house. As the youth happened to be the brother of a group member, they could convince him and the minor girl for a discussion. They cited many incidences where early marriage was proved to be burdensome for the groom and fatally menacing for the bride. As the girl was just 16 years old, they convinced her that her body and mind were not matured enough to form a family and bear the brunt of responsibility. They advised her that she should not drop-out from the school as she was in Class-X. They also tried to discourage the youth mentioning that marrying a girl below 18 years could be a punishable offence. The hour-long discussion and persuasion by the adolescent girls made the youth and the girl understand the mistake they had committed and they were about to commit by marriage.

The youth accompanied by some community leaders visited the house of the girl and handed over the girl to her parents. It was mutually and amicably decided that the youth and the girl would get married only after the girl attains 18 years of age and the youth secures some sustainable livelihood. The adolescent group in the meantime is engaged to address the issue of health and hygiene in the village.

Changing Mindsets, Changing Narratives

Amidst the hilly terrains of Rayagada and surrounded by dense forests, Kashipur was once considered to be one of the remotest blocks of Odisha. Its remoteness, ignorance of the community contributed to gender disparity to some extent. A girl, through-out her life remained a subject to miseries and sufferings. Male Chauvinism and the notion that males were superior existed from generation to generation. Fortunately, with some innovative and effective approaches initiated by adolescent girls, the narratives have started to change...ushering equality, parity and prospect for girls and women in the community.

Abrupt withdrawal of girl children from the schools and forcing early marriages of girls were quite common in many villages under Kashipur block. The girls were never offered an even platform to prosper like boys. By birth they were less privileged. The prejudices and myths of the community continued to harass and haunt them. What added to the agony was the fact that there was no conscious effort made by the adolescent girls to change their life. The girls were mere and mute witness to their sufferings.

The change in the approach of girls cropped up with the formation of group (consisting of adolescent girls within the age group of 10 to 19) under ACEH Programme implemented by Living Farms and supported by Action Child Aid, Denmark. The series of meetings conducted under PLA cycle, restored faith and confidence among adolescent girls. They began to realize and recognise their roles to convert plights in to prospects. They became efficient

in identifying issues like health, hygiene, educational challenges, early marriage and of course gender discrimination. The orientations and trainings grew them as great strategists to tackle the issues and, the motivation and self-confidence they developed as a group inspired them to take necessary action to effect changes.

While organising sports events exclusively for adolescent girls carried hidden messages that “Girls too want to break-free and play”, re-admission of drop-out girl children in the schools was emblematic of emphasis on girls’ education.

The groups formed in different villages displayed in-depth understanding, infallible strategy and immaculate execution as they took targeted initiatives. While organising sports events exclusively for adolescent girls carried hidden messages that “Girls too want to break-free and play”, re-admission of drop-out girl children in the schools was emblematic of emphasis on

girls' education. By attending VHND and Gramsabha, they claimed their participation in developmental activities.

One of such striking approaches was their initiative to create a gender sensitive society by sensitizing their male counterparts- the adolescent boys and youth. The groups had strongly realized the essence of making the adolescent boys and youth understand their issues and be empathetic in their approaches. The groups invited them to their group meetings and drew their attention to the issues of adolescent girls and sought their cooperation in their initiatives. The deep rooted notions and prejudices took time to melt down and the boys promised to change their mindset in their home and society.


It is a remarkable achievement that these adolescent boys and youth are not shying away anymore to do the household chores to support their sisters and mothers, they are motivating parents not to stop education of their sisters and raising voices against child marriage. They are partnering with the adolescent girls in holding sports events for girls, conducting campaigns on health and hygiene.

The adolescent girls have struck the right note with such splendid initiative. The adolescent boys and youth will grow up to become gender sensitive husband, father and father-in-law in the future. Such farsighted innovative approach will see a gender sensitive society in future.



A story of a
girl, of
her grit
and
glory





Kashipur block had riveted media attention more often than not in past few decades, sometimes for starvation deaths and sometimes for Cholera outbreaks. But this time, a tale of an adolescent girl's fight against all odds and valiant display of fortitude will continue to inspire girls and women of Kashipur and beyond, to take a stand of defiance for gender equality. The teen has set an example for other adolescent girls to be undeterred, unfazed in the face of difficulty and take necessary action to secure their future.

A Subhasini was an adolescent girl who lived with her father, mother and six siblings in Dumel village under Kashipur block of Rayagada district. She was the eldest among the children. Her father who was the sole bread-winner of the family found it hard to survive relying on agriculture on a small patch of land. He also started working as a mason. However with less construction activities around, his supplementary income was never sufficient to run the nine-membered family. Literally they lived on the breadline.

As the children grew up, the financial burdens started to weigh heavier on the family. Immediately after passing Sr. Secondary level (+2), Subhasini's father instructed her to stop her studies saying that he could not afford



education of all children. For him, being the eldest among the siblings and being a girl, Subhasini was supposed to sacrifice her studies to do the household chores and look after the younger siblings. Subhasini had to quietly accept the decision against her wishes. She lamented on her fate of being born as a girl. But she could not raise voice against her father either. Her parents had started looking for a match to get her married. Getting the daughter married was considered to be getting rid of a great responsibility. The sooner it happened, the better it was for the family.

It was during that time, under ACEH Project, adolescent girls of the village were forming group. Subhasini had a delayed joining due to restrictions imposed by her father. But the Kishori Sathi and other adolescent girls



made sure that all adolescent girls joined the group. The PLA meeting Cycle were essential in making the adolescent girls understand and analyse their issues, as well as, in developing an action plan and implementing the same to overcome the issues.

Subhasini started growing interest in participating in the meeting and discussions. In one meeting while the Kishori Sathi narrated a story of a girl named Reena who was forced to become a drop-out, became a victim of early

marriage and finally succumbed to malnutrition and early pregnancy, Suabhasini found a strong resemblance

in it. As she was aware of the devastating effects of early marriage and she apprehended her parents were going to get her married early, she became restless. She realized that stopping her studies was a discrimination and getting married at an early age would ruin her life beyond redemption.

“*The groups continuous effort to convince her father and Subhasini’s determination changed her father’s mind.*”

After attending the meetings under PLA cycle she had transformed. From a submissive, docile girl, she had turned in to a determined girl willing to take resilient steps.

The problem-solving approach learned during the PLA Cycle inspired her to act proactively, it was a matter of “now or never” for her. She did not want to wallow in self pity for rest of her life for not braving to take initiative.

The very next day, she mustered courage and requested her father that she wanted to study further. Her father was shocked on hearing such request. Both the request and the decisive voice in which the request was made enraged her father. He out-rightly denied and said her study would yield no benefit to the family. Subhasini got disheartened, but she was determined to find a way out. She requested her uncle to intervene and convince her father. But to her surprise her uncle suggested her father to fix her marriage as soon as possible. Subhasini correlated the discussions

held in group on gender discrimination and concluded that it was not only her father, but most of the male members in her community were inclined towards a discriminative attitude. She realized "Desperate times call for desperate measures".

It was no more a time of whispering; she felt the need of a war-cry. As an act defiance, she declared that she would not take any food and would starve until her father permitted her to continue her education. She further said that she would prefer to die starving in protest than accepting the discriminations forced upon her. Her news of starving for education became a sensation in no time. The group of adolescent girls pitched in and stood firmly in her support. The groups continuous effort to convince her father and Subhasini's determination changed her father's mind. He allowed her to study further. Subhasini's happiness knew no bounds that moment. She too promised her father that after completion her studies, she would ensure better education of all her siblings. Her father became emotional and appreciated her daughter's conviction and commitment for younger siblings.

Subhasini's mother who was a drop-out since childhood was moved with the determination of her daughter. As there was no money available with the family, her mother arranged the amount required for admission by availing gold loan.

Now Subhasini is pursuing degree level education at Rayagada college. Her next goal is to find a job and to bear the expenses of study of her siblings, and to support her father in running the family.

Her gallant act will continue to inspire girls on many accounts.

My Story, My Words

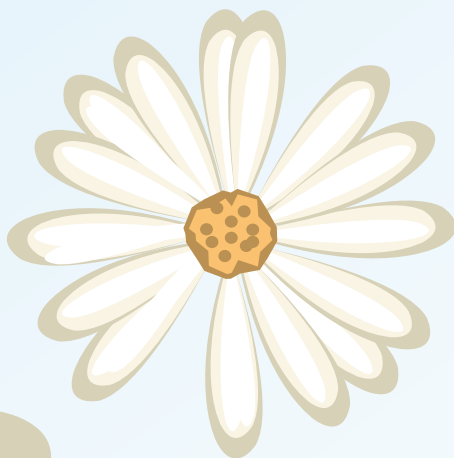
Documenting success stories for records as well as to showcase and inspire the community is quite important. As our team was busy in collecting information, they came across Namita Jhodia, who after eagerly questioning the purpose of information collection, enthusiastically requested to record her sharing. For Living Farms, it was a moment to cherish, they saw the materialization of the ACEH project in the adolescent girl who used to shy away from gatherings and avoided speaking before few months. That the girl had come forward to express her point of view was a subtle indication of substantial shift in the mindset of adolescent girls. In broader sense, perhaps it was what the project aimed at. As such, without including her sharing, this document would appear so incomplete. In an attempt to make sure her narrations reach to maximum readers; we have tried to translate her words in English without interfering with the spirit and sequence in which she expressed.






As she spoke

A big “hello” to all. I am Namita Jhodia and I am seventeen years old. I live in Telengiri village of Kashipur Block. All of you may not be knowing me, I am not so famous either. I have gathered courage to share my own story thinking that it may inspire some girls like me.



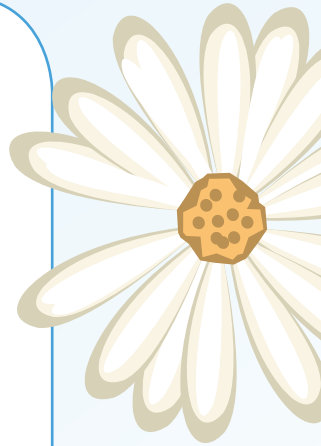


I was never fond of speaking as a sense of nervousness gripped me while interacting with outsiders and even elders in my community and family. I was never confident to address a group of people. My father and elders in my family preferred silence and signs over speaking in a meeting. Previously I had attended a lot of meetings and gatherings, fear and anxiety would take over my senses whenever my turn to introduce myself came. Expressing opinions was no less than a nightmare in small gatherings.

I have learned to overcome the fear of speaking, and I just want to share my story to inspire other girls. I know, in every village there are girls like me, who out of fear and lack of self-confidence prefer to sit last to all, stand last to all. This shyness really affects the life of girls and their development.

However, my story is not limited to overcoming my shyness.

It was when I was studying at Sr. Secondary level (+2), the Kishori Sathi of Living Farms visited my house and invited me to a meeting which was meant for adolescent girls only. I began to feel uncomfortable as meetings involved self-introduction and sharing. But as some of my friends were attending the meeting, I somehow attended the meeting. Even if a group was formed by the adolescent girls, I deliberately skipped some meetings.



The Kishori Sathi called me separately and asked me the reasons of my absence. She developed interest in me towards the meeting by mentioning that the meetings conducted under PLA Cycle would change my life for better and that I could even contribute in ensuring nutrition, health, gender equality and leadership development among adolescent girls in our village.

I started attending the meetings regularly with a purpose to know more things. The group infused in me a sense of ownership. I began to express my thoughts and opinions on issues discussed and got appreciated for those too. As days passed, I started ensuring participation of girls in the meetings by visiting their homes.

Initially I was not so much interested for the meeting. Then Living Farms with the help of Kishori Sathi formed an adolescent group involving adolescent girls of 10 to 19 years old in our village with the objective of health & nutrition security, gender equity and leadership development of adolescent girls. Her last line "You too have a bigger role to play" ignited my mind. I started attending the meetings regularly with a purpose to know more things. The group infused in me a sense of ownership. I began to express my thoughts and opinions on issues discussed and got appreciated for those too.

As days passed, I started ensuring participation of girls in the meetings by visiting their homes. Quite unknown to me, most of the group members saw a leader in me. I only realised that when they selected me as the president of the group. I

began to realize that I had created an identity for myself.

Being the president of the group, I had realized that the adolescent girls had shown great faith in me to take the group forward. Now it was my turn to rise to their expectations. Then we collectively identified issues of adolescent girls and started to take initiatives.

In order to ensure iron tablets and sanitary napkins at subsidised rate, we met the ASHA and Anganwadi worker. As we realised the importance of VHND (Village Health and Nutrition Day), we requested them to organise it regularly and on the other side ensured participation of adolescent girls in VHNDs. As a group, we made significant stride when we organised a rally to abolish the practice of child marriage. The rally passed through three villages and we kept on sensitizing the villagers with slogans and placards. The rally culminated with presentation of our demand to Sarpanch and Ward member at Panchayat office to take necessary measures to stop child marriages in the region.

All the adolescent girls have now started to develop nutrition garden in the backyard to increase dietary diversity and ensure nutrition security. We have planted more than 13 to 14 varieties of vegetables in the nutrition garden. We are also preparing organic manure and apply it in the garden. The pesticide free nutritious vegetables will keep the community members healthy and happy. Now our families and the community as a whole recognize us in a different way. They have realized that we (adolescent girls) should not be kept confined to household chores, we have greater potentials and we are born to play greater roles.

Today, I feel contented that I have contributed in a way for the changes, initiatives and developments that have taken place in my village.

I was fortunate to become the president of my group. I feel, each adolescent girl has a "leader" inside to spearhead the changes, all she requires is little trust and a platform.

