



garima
experiences and stories...

“

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knowing she wasn't strong enough to give birth to healthy children.

”

Magga Ram from Dabla village, Jaisalmer. At 23, father of three children aged 4 years, 2 years and 5 months.

Preface

This Booklet is an endeavor to compile the stories and narratives of change and of those who have become this change.

It is an account of a five-year journey with its toil, interventions, outcomes and setbacks to safeguard the dignity of Girl Child. Collected and recounted here are experiences from the 'Project Garima' undertaken by URMUL Trust in Thar Desert in India.

This account is aimed to serve as an institutional memory and as a reference material for organizations and individuals working on similar issues of concern.



THAR, DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN

Thar is a way of living. A challenging way. It tests people at every stance. Their zeal to live, progress and develop an inspiring way of living has been the signature of one of the most densely populated deserts in the world. A lot has changed, improved and progressed in decades after independence- incrementally after the 90's economic reforms. Beyond the visible progress arguably -what has changed? Mind-sets of the people, cultural mal -practices, structural frameworks and persisting poor governance still remain the driving issues for governments, organizations and individuals.

The dynamics complicate further, when the 'road of change' (a typical connotation of progress, development and a solution), connects the local communities with external influences - but negatively. Thus aggravating the traditional problems in a modern fervor. One example of this entire discourse is the gender based discrimination in the entire desert of Thar.

Sex based discrimination is one critical challenge that has remained untouched in Rajasthan. As a society it is still discriminating - physically, mentally or emotionally, on the basis of gender. Thus binding the women of sand in a life-long trap of being a women. Even today.

Amidst so many similar stories, Urmul Trust executed in 2006- project *Garima*, In a programmatic approach, this was a five year long initiative to understand gender exploitation better, and so, to address it more efficiently. Partnering with USAID, COUNTERPART and IFES, this initiative opened spaces in feudalistic and patriarchal social systems, which have in plenty- the above mentioned instances and so many similar stories. Female foeticide, infanticide, child abuse, lack of education, child marriages, and domestic violence- frame the realities of so many women here.

In past years these disparities and its resulting incidents have not just spread, but also manifested in numerous ways. This added to the traditional ill-practices, gives an immensely grim picture of the context in which project *Garima* was initiated in three districts - Hanumangarh, Ganganagar and Jaisalmer (also ranging in two sharply contrasting geographies of Rajasthan).

Historically arid- the adjoining districts of Hanumangarh and Ganganagar, saw almost a magical boom in farming (and subsequent industries) with the waters of Indus coming in through Indira Gandhi Canal in 1980s and 90s. This translated in alarming gender gaps

“He Killed Her. I Kept Her Hidden For 12 Years”. Cried A Mother From Jaisalmer With Stoned Eyes.

and further complicating the discriminations. These paradigms eventually resulted in more sophisticated and formidable ways of women sufferings.

The canal and other developments, in their wake, brought along an attaché - land hoarding, drug mafia, systemic corruption, standard failures of public service delivery, and all this with a built-in exploitation surge against women.

The disparity in sex ratio has seen a rise as well. As land became more valuable, the 'sons' as torchbearers of the family rose to an inflated status and 'girls' now meant loss of irrigated land in dowry. Female subservience in forms of female foeticide, domestic violence and child marriages, have become a standard practice. The society has little projected realization of this dynamic shift that has come along with the much celebrated developments.



Moving westward to the expanse of Jaisalmer, the landscape changes from lush greens of canal to far stretched gold and browns of sand, the dialect shifts, livelihood alters from agriculture to animal husbandry- primarily sheep rearing; and in the context, the cultural mapping of the area changes – from the Punjab influence moves into a Rajput dominant socio-culture. The economic and

education indicators, in comparison to Ganganagar and Hanumangarh districts are much lower. The 'Ghunghat', and Purdah system, are an explicit assertion of women's status and a reiteration of male supremacy in this society, thus a rewind of hundred years on the time-line. According to 2001 census, Thar stands third among places with highest gender disparity (in the age bracket of 0-6 years).





PROJECT INTERVENTIONS

Consequently, the interventions called for innovations in approach and implementation strategy. The same reformatory processes were needed to be fortified but with different sensibilities and fine tuned for successful implementation.

When the project began, no one – neither the district nor the local Panchayats would pay attention to the factual details we had. The locals would not let us into their homes, making it very difficult to reach to them. The issues of female foeticide or anything approaching gender theme could not be addressed. We began to work in the sectors of health and education to initiate and establish our connections first and slowly once we gained

trust, issues were gradually brought up. The efforts in the last five years have helped us get a footing into the project villages.

The intervention works closely with personnel of existing local administrative structures, mechanisms and programs such as the Anganwadi workers (AWW), Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs), ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) Saathins, Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs), members of the Panchayat (elected local governance bodies), school teachers, and the district administration to first sensitize and then motivate them into action, to initiate, adapt and sustain the fight.

Institutionalizing the Institutions

The interventions have been designed and developed over a period of 5 years, working with various personnel from the PRI, communities and other individual institutions, inventing and reinventing the processes.



Village Health and Sanitation Committees (VHSC) (Meetings and Trainings):

We work with various VHSCs formed at the village levels, instrumentalising these for the dissemination of information and awareness about the issues of sex selection, female foeticide and domestic violence. Urmul has been assigned with the responsibility of training VHSCs in Hanumangarh and Jaisalmer districts by the ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Rajasthan under National Rural Health Mission (NRHM).

We guide, train and equip VHSC members to strengthen the monitoring procedures and reform the health and sanitation of the village as well as information related to the issues. We work on raising awareness on the legal provisions for the issues. Along with VHSC members, we work towards taking actions that promote the overall status of the girl child such as celebrating the birth of girl

children, ensuring girls' enrolment and retention of girls in schools, promoting health care for girls and women, motivating Panchayats to honour new born baby girls and their parents, support girls performing last rites of parents, encourage couples to marry without dowry, recognize and honor couples who adopt permanent family planning methods after having one or two daughters; and counsel parents/families with daughters regarding value of the girl child. The VHSC meets each month on the decided MCHN day to discuss and to review.

CBR Groups

Community Based Response groups (CBRs) are formed to generate community feedback platform that can facilitate better planning and implementation at the local level, helping the village to become self-reliant. CBRs are formed one at every village with a population of 1000 or above. This group includes various members identified with certain skill sets, from the village by the coordinators. There are various groups in village like Kishori Prerna Manch, and Mahila Mandal that come together to form a mixed group. This helps avoid overlapping of efforts and ensures more streamlined and guided efforts.

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The Panchayats

“I forced two abortions on my wife in the early nineties – I regret it today. If it wasn't for the Ultrasound machines...” speaks the remorse of a father – as the Sarpanch of Pakki Saran, Hanumangarh, heworks hard to make people aware of the importance and pleasures of having daughters and motivates them to have children not more than 3 even when all three are daughters.

The Panchayats today are motivated and are taking initiatives at their levels. Most Panchayats, as an initial step, have warned all the Ultrasound Centres in the district, to inform them of any couple wanting to undergo sex selection tests, from their Panchayats. If 10 percent of birth certificates were issued when the project began, today 60 – 70% of certificates are issued. The Panchayats are making efforts at providing for better education and health facilities,

with women as their primary focus. They believe that the basic needs have to be met before the bigger issues, such



as child marriage and female foeticide, the traditional carry-forwards can be addressed. The Panchayats have begun adopting ideas that incorporate traditional customs of 'Thaali Bajaana' and innovations such as 'Kanya Janam Badhai Patra', at much behest. A greater acceptance has been received for those in the adjoining districts; the adoption rate has been slow in Jaisalmer.



Thaali Bajaana

Customarily, as a son is born to a family, the women of the house go beating a plate as an announcement of the joyous event. We began to beat the Thali (Plate) at the birth of a girl as well to establish equality. First it was started with individual families and then we began celebrating this at Panchayat levels. More than 30 Gram Panchayats and over 50 families have celebrated the birth of little girls by beating the thaali.

Kanya Badhai Patra

An innovation of the custom of thaali bajaana and the birth registration certificates is Kanya Janam Badhai Patra (congratulatory certificate at the birth of a girl child). This idea was first adopted at Dabli Qutub in 2009.

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Various Panchayats since (16 in Hanumangarh and 20 in Ganganagar) have adopted this idea of felicitating the parents with one or two daughters. The thought behind this is to deliver the message that birth of a child is ceremonial, be it of a girl or boy; to inspire, motivate, celebrate and raising the awareness about the importance of girls.

Community and Role Reversal

A significant change has been sighted in the communities. If only 25 percent of pregnant women registered themselves at the Anganwadis a few years back, the number has risen to 70 percent now.

Number of hospitalized deliveries has risen to 60 percent and 60 percent of women in the district avail Reproductive Health care and Family Planning measures. Such changes are indicative of the rising awareness levels amongst the locals. Individuals at their end have also begun taking considerable

measures to promote and motivate the number of girls in the society and are working towards improving their status.

Kanya Lohri, is one such initiative being taken at Ganganagar. The Ganganagar Chambers of Commerce has been partnering and supporting this since 2007.

It began with the idea of celebrating the Harvest Festival of Lohri in honour of girls, moving away from the tradition of honouring birth of boys in the family, at a community level. Scholarships for higher education are awarded to girls from families that have only one or two girls as children. In 2010, Rupees 1.93 crore worth scholarships were awarded to 101 girls in the district.

Students' participation

We have been working with the youth, extensively, to sensitize them towards the issues of Child Marriage, Domestic Violence and Female Foeticide and to inspire and motivate them into becoming ambassadors to the cause. Competitions like essay-writing, slogan-writing, painting have been used to provoke thought. We organized rallies with students from colleges and schools. They use slogans and placards to motivate as well as





spread the message. A group of self-motivated students from B.ED College, at Ganganagar, have pledged their support to the issues. They have scripted and performed a play “Betiko jeene ka haq do” (give daughters their right to live) at various occasions organized.

Referral Displays

All project villages have referrals displayed at all frequented public places. The referrals carry information and contact numbers of the authorities concerned with the issues. The information helps the locals inform the authorities of any happenings and they could take further action. It has proved useful because it helps them keep their anonymity.

Kala Jatha Programmes

Using traditional forms of entertainment – puppetry and storytelling – awareness drives across villages have been

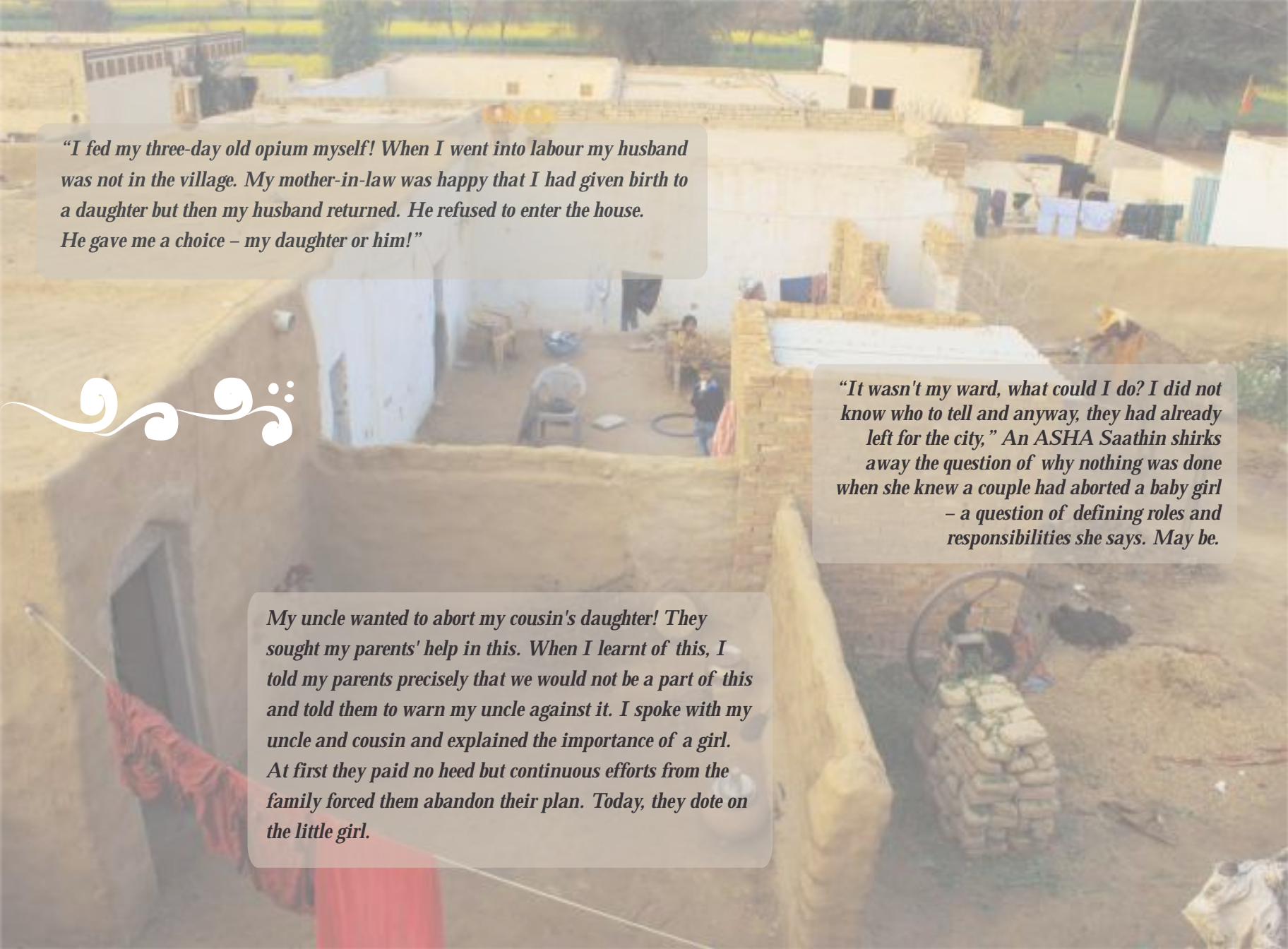
organized to extend the information and advice on the issues.

Media Workshops

Workshops with the media professionals have been conducted to help sensitize the media towards the issues of Female foeticide, domestic violence and child marriage. This has enabled extended support from the media in highlighting stories, endeavors and experiences in the field and otherwise.

Print Media

The print media has provided extensive support to the project by covering and highlighting the issues of concerns through reports, features and articles.

An aerial photograph of a village with simple, single-story houses. The houses are mostly white or light-colored with some brick walls. There are dirt courtyards between the houses. In the background, there are green fields and trees. The overall scene is a typical rural village setting.

“I fed my three-day old opium myself! When I went into labour my husband was not in the village. My mother-in-law was happy that I had given birth to a daughter but then my husband returned. He refused to enter the house. He gave me a choice – my daughter or him!”

“It wasn't my ward, what could I do? I did not know who to tell and anyway, they had already left for the city,” An ASHA Saathin shirks away the question of why nothing was done when she knew a couple had aborted a baby girl – a question of defining roles and responsibilities she says. May be.

My uncle wanted to abort my cousin's daughter! They sought my parents' help in this. When I learnt of this, I told my parents precisely that we would not be a part of this and told them to warn my uncle against it. I spoke with my uncle and cousin and explained the importance of a girl. At first they paid no heed but continuous efforts from the family forced them abandon their plan. Today, they dote on the little girl.

Young Kalia refused to accept any dowry from his in-laws and even refused gifts from all other attendees at his wedding. His involvement in the Kishore Manch and regular CBR meetings, says he, motivated him into this and he has pledged to support to safeguard the honour and dignity of girl child and women.

A grieving mother she was until she found strength and support in the mixed group. Sapna had just lost her only 5year old and was very depressed. This friend began narrating her discussions and learning's from her VHSC meetings, and would tell Sapna of how girls like Puniya are doing their parents & state proud and how they are growingly a bigger support to parents. Discussions like these Sapna says, not only helped decide for herself but also voice it and convince her family of the importance of daughters. Today she is pleased and finds herself blessed to be a mother of two daughters.

I have pledged to save at least lives of a 100 girls in this village before I die. I have been working for this for the last 15 years. Today you see so many girls in this school, there was a time there was not one girl. We struggled to explain it to the village members the importance of a girl. But today the youth are more aware and few of them are standing up against the pressure.



“An honour, because you are my parents!”

85 little baby girls and their parents were congratulated and honoured at festivities organized by the Gram Panchayats of Doongarsingpura and Ganeshgarh, together. A crowd of 1500 was present to witness the distribution of Kanya Janam Badhai Patra to those parents, who had a daughter in the bygone year. The Zilla Pramuk, Zilla Pradhan and a few MLAs supported the endeavor.





A struggle continues...

A mother and a daughter fighting for their right to existence... An impending decision!

In the village of Kumaharawali Dhani, in the district of Hanumangarh, a mother strives to save and restore her daughter's rights. A fight where she finds herself strengthened by her sister (who incidentally is her co-sister as well). Veerpal and Manveer, two women of exemplary strength who walked out of their home wanting acceptance for Veerpal's daughter.

Veerpal's husband and mother-in-law forced her to undergo an ultrasound examination to determine the sex of her unborn child. When their fears came alive they were determined to terminate Veerpal's pregnancy. Veerpal put her foot down and decided she would give birth to the girl and she did. She was meted out with all sorts of atrocities, physical and mental. She was beat up black and blue and once, suffered hemorrhage for which she was hospitalized in Bikaner for a fortnight.

When the atrocities got unbearable Veerpal decided to walk out of home and fight for justice. Manveer walked out on the family as well in support of her sister and niece. The village Panchayat has tried to resolve the matter but in vain. The mother-daughter waits for justice to be meted out to them. They wish to find a place in a loving home. But will justice be received?

A historical wedding in 108 years:

Patriarchy strongly rooted - only male children were preferred, thus this saw the absence of girls for more than a century. For 108 years there were no marriages of daughters in Devada, a village in Jaisalmer.

A father, braved, took a stance and the first girl in a hundred years was born in the village. Grieved with loss of his only son to malaria, a year before his daughter was born, Mr. InderSingh pledged that he would not let his child, be it a girl or boy, die. He stood against the village and raised his daughter providing all 4 children equal opportunities to grow. The daughter was educated till class 10 and was married with a pompous wedding as she turned sixteen.

Today he is a grandfather of a girl and six boys. Unfortunate however, is the fact that the mother of his granddaughter does not think very highly of his decision to let the girl survive. She explicitly says, "I'm having a third child only for a second son. Both my sisters-in-law have two sons each. If it weren't for my father-in-law I would not have let her live" pointing at the little toddler in front of her. Speaks the hurt and pain of being a woman in the feudalistic framework of society, or the hurt ego of a woman beaten at familial politics, is easier left to contemplation.





“I'm not to be blamed for the state of my children or that of my wife. Her parents should have known better than have her married knowing she wasn't strong enough to give birth to healthy children.”

This is how a conversation unfolds with a father, who has his two children hospitalized for malnourishment. He is a father of 3 at 23, married for 5 years, to a woman who is all of 17 years today. The woman is weak and mal-nourished, and the children, for obvious reasons, are under-nourished.

Ashok, coordinator at Jaisalmer, Urmul trust, came to know of the pathetic situation and ran to the rescue. He and a few more people managed to get the two year old Nisha and five month old Prakash admitted to the government hospital, Jaisalmer, where they are currently under observation and are being treated. With no remorse, the father Magga Ram did not wish to have the two children admitted. He thought they would manage! The wife remains silent.

*As narrated to Mrs. Vimala, Project coordinator, Jaisalmer
(February, 2011)*

The way ahead...

The census 2011 indicates that the disparity in the sex ratio has reduced in the district of Ganganagar – a testimony to the efforts and their effects of last five years. As a significant start, this highlights the changing mentalities of communities and a hope for a better future for girls. Despite this, the situation is far from congratulatory and lacuna at sustenance in the initiatives is continuously felt. The sex ratio of Rajasthan has fallen from 909 to 883 causing for the rise in alarm.

Dignity of Girl Child Foundation is an attempt to address the newer facets of the gender based discrimination in Rajasthan. It has been established as an endeavour for affirmative action for girls, restoration of their value in the society, complete ban on sex determination tests and female foeticide. This initiative pivots at renewing and sustaining efforts to check the declining sex ratio in the state of Rajasthan.


The constant refurbishing of ideas, thoughts, zeal and enthusiasm will see the fight against sex selection and female foeticide through. These rejuvenated efforts will continuously strive to restore the lost spaces of girls in the society.



The Team

The tiny sprouts of change have been nurtured with undeterred zeal, passion and toil. Oscillating in time and space -from one village to another, from one mindset to another and from one story to another- our team has worked with much fervor and ardent determination. Hours turned into days and days into years, and even today each one of our team member works with the same enthusiasm they once started of with. Standing by each other in support, sharing ideas, innovating newer schemes and plans, drawing newer possibility, has been our greatest strength.

"We have no problems working with people. They are most cooperative once they realise and understand the alarm in the situation. Initially we do have to tackle a lot of apprehensions and misconceptions but slowly these give way. We don't really do anything but motivate people into seeing the true picture; rest just snowballs thereafter," says NishaChauhan. Adding to this, Vikram Singh highlights "The actual problems lie in the expectations of the funders and the field reality. The disparity is huge - each village is different, each case is different and therefore the way to tackle them would naturally be different. Time-bound and target orientated projects don't give us the space to work around each issue with utmost sincerity and care. However, we do understand the constraints on the funders' part and just try doing our possible best in each situation.



Mrs. Vimala reiterates the difference in the worlds of Jaisalmer and Ganganagar-Hanumangarh. “In jaisalmer,” she says, “we had to bargain our way through homes using health concerns as a shield. The purdah system forbade the women to talk to women outside of their community. It has been a real task to gain their trust and even greater a problem to raise the question of female infanticide and foeticide with the communities here. Today after five years the situation is slightly more promising but the pockets of traditional carry-forwards remain.”

We have seen five years of success stories interspersed with dejections and rejections, but each one of them only brought us closer to victory of our efforts. We understand how important it has been to even seed the rhetoric in people and this we believe has been our biggest victory. As a team, we had decided that even if we could get people to start talking and openly address the issues, it would slowly but definitely translate into a change. And this exactly what it seems now. Those questions are taking their space and are helping make a way for a solution. This has been our greatest motivator.



Urmul Trust

In the harsh and inhospitable regions of rural Rajasthan in the Thar Desert, URMUL Group of Organisations have been innovating models for inducing community-driven socio- developmental changes by devising programmes, strengthening them, sustaining and finally handing them over to communities.

Urmul's work is guided by the spirit and trust placed in people's capabilities to bring about the much needed social change with their own efforts. Most of the work is focused on vulnerable and marginalised sections of the society - Women and Children. Following the integrated development approaches, Urmul works on all the Millennium Development Goals. We adopt service delivery platforms, advocacy and lobbying tools for empowering the marginalised and vulnerable sections of society in over 1000 villages in this desert state of India- thematically working on Health, Education, Livelihood, Environment, Mother-Child care et al.

Food, Fodder and Water securities are major concerns including drought and disaster mitigation. Women's socio-economic empowerment, Capacity building, improving access to basic services, Education, Early Child Care & Development, and Child Right Issues are few concerns addressed. Urmul recognises and acknowledges the strength of youth and their role in development of any society and thus, collaborates with a network of over 5000 youth for their capacity building and driving them towards awareness and Rights-based development.



Urmul works across verticals ranging from Governments and INGOs to Panchayati raj Institutions, Self Help Groups and other Civil Society Organizations. Collaborating with over 300 gram panchayats in over 1000 villages in the Western Rajasthan directly. More than 30000 families have been beneficiaries of various programmes and have joined to form a network to carry forth the endeavours and reach out.

The Group has been working as an implementation agency for numerous state and central government programs including Shiksha Karmi, Lok Jumbish and Integrated Child Development Scheme. The Government of India has also identified URMUL Trust as mother NGO for implementing reproductive and child health projects in Western Rajasthan.

During these decades Urmul has developed a network of several committed voluntary agencies, consortiums and individuals in the region. The trust is also an executive member in several GO-NGO collaborations and Policy Planning Committees.

We had a celebration at the arrival of our daughter. The entire village and all are near and dear ones had been called to join in our joyous occasion. My wife and I were just happy to have a child after 10 years of our marriage and it couldn't matter if it were a boy or a girl. We feel so blessed to have her.

Mr. Bhati, Khatori village, Jaisalmer



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