



SAHAJ TEAM

Social Accountability for Adolescents' Rights and Citizenship

This article is an account from a collaborative project 'Adolescents as Citizens and Change Agents for Social Accountability' implemented by three non -government organisations SAHAJ, SWATI and SARTHI in four backward districts of the state of Gujarat, namely, Vadodara, Surendranagar, Mahisagar and Panchmahal, in India. The stories of the adolescent girls and boys in the article give voice to their experiences of participating in the project and what it meant for them.

Nisha – an Adivasi girl from Mahisagar District

I am Nisha Parsing. I am 17 years old. I live in Dotawada Village, Santrampur Taluka, in Mahisagar District. I have passed Class 10. We are seven sisters and one brother. My parents are farmers and daily wage labourers. I was adopted by my maternal uncle in my childhood. My uncle is also a farmer and has two

sons. He educated all three of us. Our village is very small. It did not even have a primary school. We had to attend primary and middle school in the adjacent village, Daliyati.

Before the Kishori Group¹ started in our village, we did not get our Take Home Ration, nor iron tablets regularly. The Kishori group was started with just ten girls, with the support of SAHAJ

¹Kishori group is an Adolescents Girls' group part of SABLA programme. SABLA is a Government of India Programme which aims to improve the nutritional and health status of adolescent girls in the age group of 11-18 years and empower them by providing education in life-skills, health and nutrition. (for more details see:

<http://wcd.gujarat.gov.in/sabla.html>

and regular meetings were conducted in the Anganwadi. SAHAJ organized a leadership training programme for us. After being appointed as a peer leader, I have attended all the training workshops conducted by SAHAJ.

After learning about the ways to calculate Body Mass Index (BMI), I started measuring heights and weights of girls in our group. The Anganwadi worker found it difficult to calculate BMI, so we decided to do it ourselves. Initially there was an argument with the Anganwadi worker when

the boys wanted their weights to be taken. She said that boys are not included in the SABLA programme and that the weighing scale would break! But we convinced her about the need to measure BMI to gather the nutritional status of children. It is then she allowed the boys to measure their weights too on a regular basis.

The nurse was not dispensing Iron tablets to us regularly, but after a discussion with her on the need to get the mineral supplements, she began to distribute the tablets

regularly. We are ensuring that our Iron (Haemoglobin) levels are checked periodically. We also organised a Kishori Divas (Adolescent Girls' Day) in our Anganwadi.

I feel a lot of change in myself. Initially I used to feel scared to talk to anyone, especially in front of a group. But not anymore. Today, I can present my views in front of a group. I am able to put forth an argument or thought on behalf of my group in the Jan Samwad (Public Dialogue) in Sangawada.



I AM Sheetalba Danubhai Zhala. My brother Dalpat and I live in Mulada. I belong to a Darbar family (Rajputs). I am eighteen years old, soon to be married.

I joined the adolescent group two years back and was elected as peer leader for the girls. My brother was the peer leader in the boys group. My father is very supportive. He encouraged us to attend meetings. Travelling out of our village on my own was initially not possible. My brother would accompany me should there be a need to travel outside our village to meet with health officers or participate in trainings, outside the village. Gradually I gained confidence. While I focused on demanding

services in the Anganwadi for the girls, Dalpat worked on other issues. He filed an RTI application to find out why the provisions from the Public Distribution System (PDS) shops were not reaching the people. Since the time of filing the RTI application one sees improvement in the distribution of the rations, though the food supplies are of poor quality.

Many girls in my village drop out of higher education because the high school is not in the village. Parents are reluctant to send their daughters out of the village. There are no bus services in our village. The private transporters fill in passengers beyond the vehicles' capacity and drive recklessly. There is a lot of 'chheddti' (harassment) along the way, thus forcing parents not to send the girls on their own.

We discussed the challenges faced by girls in accessing transport facilities and problems like lack of

higher educational facilities in the village, public safety of girls etc. in one of our initial meetings and Dalpat wrote an application to the Manager of the Surendra Nagar District Bus Depot (Public Transport) The letter was read out to our group and we got signatures to support the demand. Dalpat personally handed the letter to the manager, who accepted it and acknowledged that he did not have the authority to start a bus service to the village and an initiative such as this would need time. We continue to keep the pressure on this demand.

Meanwhile, the girls, supported by the boys, started demanding services in the Anganwadi centre. There were many concerns like the centre not starting on time; girls denied the "Take Home Ration", no health check-ups for girls etc. We continue to engage with the Anganwadi worker first, helping her measure the height and weight of the girls and distribute the 'red tablets'. Some

gaps still remained. I highlighted these problems in the Jan Samvad to the Integrated Child Development Services(ICDS)officer. The girls in my group and staff of the NGO appreciated my systematic representation. I am happy to see improvements in the Anganwadi services since then.

My group is strong, as I train three girls to become peer leaders. I do not want a break in our efforts - we still continue to have the challenges of water shortage in the Anganwadi centre and the demand for safer bus services is ongoing effort.

I wish parents of children in my village understand the value of higher education for girls even if it means sending them out of the village to pursue their dream. I want SWATI to continue to empower adolescent girls and organize vocational training aimed at financial independence for women.



Nisha and Sheetal are two of the 100 peer leaders nurtured by a collaborative project 'Adolescents as Citizens and Change Agents for Social Accountability' being implemented by SAHAJ, SWATI and SARTHI in four backward districts of Gujarat, namely,

Vadodara, Surendranagar, Mahisagar and Panchmahal.

The goal of the project is to create a model of leadership and citizenship amongst adolescent girls and boys (11 to 18 years) based on gender and rights perspective. The main

activities of the project are to: increase awareness about gender, sexuality, and rights; promote collective action by local groups of girls and boys; and, advocate with stakeholders – like parents, government functionaries, and village leaders - on adolescent rights. The project is anchored on entitlements related to three government programmes – SABLA (adolescent girls' empowerment and nutrition programme implemented through the Anganwadi centres and the Department of Women and Child Development), Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health Programmes implemented by the Health Department (ARSH) and Nehru Yuvak Kendra Scheme implemented by the Youth Department (NYKS).

The project is implemented in 20 anganwadi areas each in Surendranagar, Mahisagar and Panchmahals districts. In Vadodara, 20 slums and 10 schools are included as part of the implementation of the project. The project also addresses parents of adolescents and other stakeholders from the villages / slums such as local elected representatives, Anganwadi workers, and Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs - local community health workers) to

create an informed support system for the adolescents.

Outcomes of Success

A midterm evaluation, commissioned in 2016, shows that the project is extremely relevant for building citizenship and rights awareness among the adolescents. There has been marked increase in awareness among adolescents about their entitlements. Children have reported that the skills imparted during the project period equipped them to claim these entitlements. A key instrument has been the training in filing Right to Information applications. As observed in Hetal's story, the boys and girls wrote RTI applications going beyond the three schemes that the project was focused on. They have successfully mobilised

other youth and member of the community to get new school building, improvements in the Anganwadi centres, regular water supply, bus service to their remote villages, computer classes for the youth in the villages and so on.

The project has led to increased self-expression and 'voice' amongst the girls and boys. They have been able to negotiate for their rights and freedom within their families, even in very conservative and patriarchal Rajput families such as that of Hetal. They have represented their collective issues in public fora like the Jan Samvaads (Public Dialogues), and in government offices which are steeped in power and typically regard young people as immature.



The Jan Samvaads (Public Dialogues) were helpful in establishing accountability of the program managers for adolescent related schemes. Continuous and constructive engagement of the adolescents with service providers of the three different departments – and especially with the Anganwadi workers implementing the SABLA programme - has resulted in increased interest and motivation amongst these workers.

Yuva Manch (Youth Platform - federation of the adolescents' groups) at the block and district levels have contributed to the peer leaders' sense of empowerment – the solidarity of belonging to a larger collective has expanded their sense of self. As Yuva Manch members they have extended their demands at the

state level questioning why the programmes are not working well in their districts.

One sees the increase in participation of the young people in public affairs.

Vinod Savjibhai of Mahisagar District gives us a glimpse of being a young leader:

All the young boys and elders of my village have - selected me as the head of the Gram Sanjivani Samiti. The Samiti received funds of Rs. 10000 and I have taken the responsibility of utilising the fund for solving the health issues of the village.

I have written an application to the ICDS Department for the construction of a new Anganwadi Centre (AWC). Since the old building is dilapidated now, I

made sure that all the adolescent boys and girls are with me on this and everyone readily signed the application.

Belonging to the tribal community, my aim is to get out of the “labourer” and “migrant worker” stereotype. During my computer classes, I grabbed the opportunity of enrolling about 300 adolescent girls and boys from Dahod and Mahisagar in “Digital India” computer literacy program run by the government.

Someone carelessly ended up causing a fire in the jungle which is a part of our village; I gathered all the boys of my group and we doused the fire.

Apart from their public function as citizens, the project has also made an impact on the adolescents – especially on the boys - in their private domains. As Anil Kumar of Jainabad (Surendra Nagar District) states:

Gender equality, masculinity and sexuality were very new concepts for me ... I had a lot of misconceptions about women and men. I thought of women as inferior to men and that they should do all the household chores. And, I should not talk to





girls, not help in household chores, I kept away from such things. ... But after the discussions in our group, I have started respecting women and begun to understand their value. I try to help my mother and sister as much as I can.

Suvar Kaushik Kumar Rameshbhai (Dahod district) explains

When a session on Gender Equality was taken in my group, we became aware about the discrimination amongst boys and girls especially in household chores and what the boys in the group should do to bring about a

change. All of us (boys in the group), decided that we shall help our mothers and sisters in household chores by cutting vegetables, filling water, washing clothes etc. Six of us (Suvar Kaushik, Dilip Kumar, Saurabh, Ankit Kumar, Jignesh and Pravin) have already started doing all the three chores regularly in our homes.

Challenges faced

It was very difficult to involve especially the school going adolescents in the community based programme of the project. Many of them work in the fields or look after cattle and have to travel long distance to block or district

headquarters where their schools are located. With their- school, work and travel schedules, they were unable to attend the project activities. Initially it was difficult for the girls to get permission from their families to attend the group meetings. It took repeated visits and discussions and building of trust by the NGO field staff before the girls were allowed to participate in the -- project activities. In addition, it was difficult to have a continued intervention with the adolescents due to seasonal migration.

Confrontation is an integral aspect of rights based work. This creates friction between the duty bearers

and the claimants of rights. In few cases, after the Jan Samwad, the peer leaders who presented the findings about non-availability of services in the Anganwadi centre, faced backlash of the concerned health workers. In one case the husband as well as in laws of the Anganwadi worker threatened the peer leader and warned her about the implications of raising such issues in public fora. There was a strong reluctance amongst the ICDS officers to admit the need for external monitoring of the SABLA scheme. The officials claimed that the internal monitoring mechanisms of ICDS Department were robust enough to identify the areas which need correction.

The poor implementation of NYKS scheme and the ARSH programme resulted in non-

response towards peer leaders' efforts to claim entitlements. The NYKS program officials in one district did not respond to the demands of the peer leaders. Non response from the officials disheartened the children as they get frustrated quite easily.

Lessons learnt

The adolescents as a group are effective change makers. The impact of inputs given to this group gets amplified once they acquire the necessary skills and information to claim their rights. However, there is also a need to take a differential approach considering the age group, educational levels, and socio economic and cultural contexts of the children.

The project activities need to be

planned in such a way that they do not hamper the studies of the children – acquiring education is their primary function at this stage in their lives.

Where adolescents are central actors in programme implementation, it is necessary that the parents and community members, such as local elected representatives or members of the Village Health and Development Committees are also involved. This lends greater seriousness and credibility to the adolescents' efforts to demand accountability of service providers.

Since adolescents are a vulnerable group, there is a need to undertake additional measures to safeguard them from a backlash faced by them in such endeavours.

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