

Chasing Dreams Through Literacy

Functional Literacy for Dignity and Entitlements



Supported by:



Sahbhagi Shikshan
Kendra

Empowering Minds for Change

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Foreword from the Director

Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra has been working in the district of Sitapur for the past decade. Two years ago, with the support of Korean National Commission for UNESCO, we initiated a functional literacy and life skills project aimed at uplifting rural adult women from particularly marginalised backgrounds. The 15 functional literacy centres we established continue to run in the block of Khairabad with much success and local acclaim, and we hope to continue to make further strides both here and in surrounding blocks in years to come.

This document is a recognition and celebration of the incredible work done in these two years by the centre facilitators, young community women who are an essential part of this project. While an equal space has been given to the particularly unique women learners, their success stories must also be seen as a reflection of the achievements of the centre facilitators. This document was compiled by Mr. Zubin Miller, along with the support of Ms. Priya Dhawan. It involved numerous conversations and visits over a couple of months, allowing the chance to build complete stories.

We hope this compilation of case studies, with an innovative introductory section, will be both insightful and inspiring to those who read and absorb these stories. We look forward to any suggestions, comments and reflections from readers. Finally, we would like to thank KNCU-Bridge Asia Project for giving us the platform in order to carry out both the case studies as well the integral work we have been able to do for the local communities that they reflect.

Ashok Singh

Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra

Project Background

Literacy and empowerment

This project understands literacy as not just the ability to read and write but to broaden our horizons of communication and knowledge. In other words, literacy occupies a central place in the journey of empowerment. If we understand empowerment as the opportunity to expand one's scope and potential for action, then clearly literacy fits seamlessly. Through literacy, one's ability to make choices and develop new strategies is extended. People's empowerment then, the heart of sustainable and equitable societal development, finds its deepest roots in literacy.

Literacy also possesses a direct link with other aspects of learning and development such as health, maternal care, early childhood education, professional skills. This project emphasises the link between literacy, continuing education and abilities to increase livelihoods productivity. It hopes to serve as an illustration of why literacy is fundamental to other 'spheres of development'. For example, a UNFPA report on 'empowering women' described how 1) educated mothers recognise the importance of healthcare and 2) have a greater influence on their children's education attainment than their fathers. This document will provide a detailed exploration of the immense value of literacy for adult women and how this project has managed to achieve it.

Success of program design and approach

This program has been designed and implemented in an effort to push down and create ownership at every level as much as possible. We recognise that it is only when people themselves are given responsibility as part of change and learning for their own community that they will feel truly motivated. In short, over time participation at the community or group level must become less "their" participation in "our" programme and more "our" participation in "theirs". In order to achieve this the following approaches have been taken:

Young, educated, local women have been trained as "centre facilitators", "tutors" and "change agents" and given total responsibility over their centres.

1. Training in order to develop their knowledge, understanding and teaching of literacy
2. Training to raise their awareness of gender inequalities, marginalisation, and women's empowerment and in techniques to teach women about these issues too
3. Training in how to negotiate with existing power structures, community influencers and organisations to encourage and support change

It is hoped that these centre facilitators also represent real-life reflections of the possibilities for the

sisters, daughters, and granddaughters of the women learners.

- The learners' progress is reviewed and reflected upon regularly, with the women consulted about any different approaches and content they might wish for
- Peer-to-peer support and roles of responsibility within the centres are encouraged
- Cross-centre learning exchanges have also been held

Concepts Of Empowerment

Qualitative:

- Collective human agency (community participation, organisation building, collective action)
- Self-realisation (self-confidence, dignity, self-respect, pride)
- Impact on context (resource management, health practices, gender roles, participation in household decisions, involvement in children's education)

Quantitative:

- Reading prayers, newspapers, magazines, novels, medicine labels, cards, calendars, fliers, coupons, advertisements, television notices, grocery lists.
- Writing their name, address, short sentences, filling out forms etc.
- Incremental, small-step progression routes are in place within the curriculum to stretch women's learning

Functional Literacy Centres

The classes are a time of both learning and pleasure for the women. Beyond acquiring the ability to read and write letters, it is clear that they really enjoy doing a focused activity. The satisfaction they derive from using their minds to do something new is easily overlooked. They show real desire to rise to the challenge of learning to read and write at this later age.

Apart from learning and pleasure, the classes represent a safe space and an opportunity to discuss and debate important life skills. While progress has been made in this area, the reality is such that there are some subjects which remain difficult to talk about intimately.

Family Planning and Domestic Violence - *sharam ki baat hai*

Women freely respond to the basic question of how many children they have, with most admitting to having more than 2 and some revealing that they have as many as 6 or 7. Further, they engage with discussions about the various

Local Insight 1: *Bahu* (daughter-in-law), despite being considered the “adornment of the house” is at the bottom of the pecking order. She is expected to “adjust”, to be shy, and to show respect in the service of all other family members.

difficulties of having several children (e.g. importance of spacing pregnancies for health reasons). However, when it comes to discussing different forms of contraception they can access from the local Asha Anganwadi there is a clear sense of unease and scepticism. On one occasion, many of the women covered their faces when specific contraceptive methods were mentioned, with one of them explaining that 'it is not that we don't understand...it is embarrassing!' The reality is such that their husbands and female relatives would not accept contraception. In fact, women do not even feel that they can talk to their mother-in-law about the possibility of delaying children. On occasion, when the women were asked about the possibility of making a 'pact' with their husband about pregnancy and contraception, one of the women brave enough to speak out amidst the silence explained that 'no...it's embarrassing'.

Similarly, while on the whole women have been open about discussing domestic violence and admitting that it does take place, there is a general reluctance to share personal experiences. On one occasion, many of the women admitted that it does happen a lot but then quickly asserted that not to anyone they know or have been involved with. When measures were explained for such situations, such as filing a FIR at a police station, or in more emergency situations calling the police helpline, one woman responded that “the police should not be involved so fast”. Another woman also became very suspicious of the questions, and defensively dismissed the possibility of the police helping, explaining that they will come and go and only “make things worse”.

Finally, although the women generally discuss menstruation and menstrual hygiene with great comfort and interest, they do still feel a level of shame in regard to this topic. When it is humorously asked to them if they have their menstrual cycles at the same time as their other female relatives, a few of the women covered their faces with embarrassment. They admitted that neither they nor teenage girls are yet able to talk freely about menstruation amongst themselves at home. This emphasises the importance of the FLC as a safe space for them to break down such taboo topics.

This is echoed by centre facilitators outside the centres, lamentably admitting that certain topics are very sensitive and are either met with silence or defensiveness, and only occasionally with murmurs or rebellion.

Local Insight 2: Educating a girl, especially in a poor family, is often referred to as “watering a neighbour's tree”, since the economic gains would be automatically transferred to the spouse's family. Moreover, the dowry for an educated girl would be more expensive since the likelihood of finding a groom with the same education qualifications would be tough for a poor family. Thus, ideologies, norms and practices embodied in the implicit contracts of household and kinship relations interlock to curtail women's control and ability over resources, assets, labour, and power.

Local Insight 3: Finding a salaried job as a divorced woman in rural UP and living on one's own is just not a feasible option. Thus, it becomes more understandable why harmony i.e. relatively tension free family relations, mutual respect which comes along with conformity, is so important.

Participation in Local Governance

While it is not expected of all women at the centre, a select few suitable women have been encouraged to become more involved in local panchayat politics. This is all the more relevant since there is a general consensus among the learners that the most of the local pradhans are uninterested in them. Most learners have never had any sort of interaction with their local pradhan. In fact, one woman who is a pratinidhi of the local panchayat complained that the pradhan purposely doesn't notify her when the seat time comes around. This attitude was reflected by during a meeting with a pradhan of one of the FLC panchayats (Rahimabad). He dismissed our requests that he visits the local FLC to talk to the women and spread awareness, remarking that 'they all have a lot of knowledge...there is no need'.

Local Insight 4: “Purdah Pradhan” (roughly translating to shadow pradhan) is a widely used term to refer to the reality that the work of the mandated 33% of women pradhans is actually done by their husbands.

Quantitative realities

4.55% – percentage of women police personnel in the police force in the local state of UP (Ministry of Home Affairs advisory is 33%)

47% – percentage of girls in India who get married before the age of 18 (UNICEF report, 2016)

10% – death rate of babies born to adolescent (13-18 years old) women in UP

33% – percentage of girls not attending Pre School Education activities (Anganwadi) in 2014-15 (increase from 3% in 2010-11)

41 – the amount of tubectomy operations completed for every vasectomy in UP

Organisations often do not plan wider strategic objectives nor do they think about what will happen beyond the initial steps. In other words, they often do not see how learning might lead to wider gender empowerment and equality. This program acknowledges the importance of a wider, sustainable vision. The local community 'change agents' thus play a crucial role in continuing local development after the project comes to an end.

Local Insight 5: Men = even when women are 'allowed' to join learning activities, their new knowledge, insights and questions can create discomfort and psychological threats to the status of brothers, husbands and fathers – they may not be highly literate and fear that their women becoming better educated undermines their status. Deep-rooted structural constraints, which prevent the development of greater equalities, must be made visible, challenged and changed. Engaging the support of one or two influential men can have a snowball effect throughout the community.

Case Studies: Whose Reality Counts?

The following case studies represent an opportunity to hear the stories of these 10 women and give them the recognition they truly deserve. After all, a central part of literacy and empowerment is

about giving a voice to those who have been silenced.

From the perspective of poverty reduction strategies, the voices of the poor must be heard so that strategies can be tailored not only at the macro level, but also to the needs of the poor at the micro level. To an extraordinary degree, we development professionals abstain from looking at ourselves as people. The subject is almost taboo. Yet who we are, where we go, how we behave, what we are shown and see, how we learn, are deceived, and deceive ourselves, the concepts we use, the language we speak, what we believe and, above all, what we do and do not do, so obviously affect all other aspects of development and development policy. We must reconstruct our realities, to change as people, and enable and empower others to change.

While certain sections of the development world have been critical of measurements of empowerment as being “impressionistic”, we believe it is useful to listen to people's often subjective impressions of how life has changed for them. It would be foolish to ignore evidence of empowerment on the basis that it was not collected in a rigorous or scientific manner. Although the conclusiveness of evidence in any one project may be open to question, the accumulation of evidence from multiple and very diverse sites can be a useful pointer and we feel it should have not been ignored.

Jodha's Paradox: coined after a pioneering study by the professor NS Jodha in the 1980's that demonstrated that income-poverty, though important, is only one aspect of deprivation. Participatory appraisal methods in recent decades have recognised that there are many dimensions and criteria of disadvantage, ill-being and well-being as people experience them. In addition to poverty, these include social inferiority, isolation, physical weakness, vulnerability, seasonal deprivation, powerlessness and humiliation.

Centre facilitators

- 1) Anita Devi
- 2) Uzma
- 3) Chandani
- 4) Mehazabeen
- 5) Neetu

Learners

- 1) Kamla
- 2) Draupadi
- 3) Tara
- 4) Saira
- 5) Renu

Map of FLCs

My Life, My Community

Anita Devi



“If you never leave your house, how will you learn things?”. When Anita made this remark, she admitted that at one point in time she once used to “sit at home every day”. Now, however, she has gained the opportunity to “go to lots of places and gain knowledge...instead of spending all my time doing housework and watching movies on TV.” The independence and education she has received – climaxing with her responsibility of running a literacy centre – is something she is keen to share with people in her community. She can empathise with this situation, understanding the personal significance of “not having to always rely on other people...being able to do things independently, like filling in a bank form”.

From her own life, Anita offered a narrative of change – heavy in detail and delight – in regard to what she wears when she travels from her home to the centre. At first, she explained, “the distance was far...I used to travel by auto...spending somewhere between 1200-1500 rupees per month...since I get 3000 a month [honorarium] I am only left with 1500-1800”. Realising what she was wasting, “one day I just decided that I'll go by cycle, so for 2 or 3 days I did that...but I was wearing a *sari*...and this kept getting stuck in the cycle”. So, she plucked up the courage to ask her

“in-laws if it was okay to wear a suit (*salwar kameez*) and go, and they agreed”. This was clearly a big deal for her, and possibly a tough and lengthy negotiation with her in-laws, considering how she lowered her voice and spoke quickly (this conversation took place at her in-law's house, where she lives, with a few of them hovering around).

In terms of her actual work at the centre, an enormous shift has also occurred. In her capacity as centre facilitator (and extra responsibility as a 'change agent'), Anita initially doubted whether she was “capable of doing the work with the women at the centre”. Now, however, she confidently reels off a list of the things her learners have learnt (“how to read and write...what a self-help group is...about gender discrimination...”), showing genuine amazement at how much they have been able to achieve. She emphasises that “they could not read a thing...they would look at those letters and understand nothing”. Visiting her centre and witnessing the excitement the women felt from just being able to recognise a simple letter, having “not received the opportunity to learn till this late age...”, put the pride with which Anita expressed this achievement into its proper context.

While Anita speaks articulately and positively about aspects of her own personal life improving, it is the journey of the women she teaches that she feels most passionately about. Her sense of community responsibility is reflected in her eloquent remark: “let's take my village...there are 60 people. If 20 people have got the chance to become literate, they should take those 40 who are left behind...who are illiterate...and go forward together'. Drawing a more explicit connection with her own role as a change agent, she also elaborated on ways she has enlightened learners beyond literacy, such as “making them aware of their right to visit the *gram sabha*...to have their say...on what is right and wrong”.

Personally, Anita recognises that she must make the most of this experience to keep moving forward in life. With great maturity, she asserted that even though her in-laws run a successful photocopying business, “I don't want to remain dependent on others...for how long will my parents-in-law provide for me?’ After finishing her B.Ed., she plans to go one step further and do an MA so that eventually she will achieve her goal of “standing on my own feet”. Finally, Anita wanted to give the message that although there remains 'a lot of discrimination towards girls...how it was 10 years ago, it isn't anymore...with that hope for more change we must keep working...”.

Releasing the Fire Within

Uzma



“Earlier I was scared to speak to people...but now if anyone behaves badly, I'll even give them a slap” Uzma insists, letting out a little chuckle as her words settle in the air. Clearly aware of the irony produced by the combination of her endearing personality and the hostility of her words, she once again excitedly asserts 'if a fight occurs, I'll get hitting'. Taking a more serious tone, Uzma recounted an occasion in which “an old drunk came into the centre during an orientation programme, so I immediately scolded him and threw him out...before I would not have been able to speak this way. If anyone is rude or disrespectful, I will not tolerate it”.

The reality of Uzma's life was such that she had little opportunity to release these innate qualities of courage and compassion before joining the program. Even on the rare occasion that she would leave her home, “it would never be alone...I just couldn't”, she admitted. Yet now these qualities have come to the fore, as she impressively carries out her work as a centre facilitator for a highly diverse group of women. One of these women, her neighbour Shehnaz, is one of many who has given positive feedback on their time at the centre. Deaf and dumb since birth, Shehnaz has

nevertheless been a shining star at the centre. Through a combination of her enthusiasm and hard-work and Uzma's patience and creativity, those 4 months ended up being an unforgettable experience. By using sign language, for instance miming the action of eating a banana, Uzma has been able to teach Shehnaz much more than just how to read and write her name and village. In fact, she has even been able to participate in activities beyond basic literacy, such as an exposure visit to the police station alongside learning how to file a FIR.

In addition to these responsibilities, Uzma was keen to emphasise the role she has taken up as a community mediator. She tells me of a learner's family issue that she was able to resolve. This learner lamented to Uzma that her young daughter, around 16 years old, was being coerced into marriage. Hearing this, Uzma met the whole family and counselled them on the matter, urging them to stop it from happening and affecting her future. She proudly exclaims that the marriage was called off, and that even now, a couple of years later, the woman is not married. Yet, evidently caught up in the memory, she gloomily muttered “shaadi at such a young age...”, evoking the thought of the thousands of other women whose child marriages are not prevented.

Nevertheless, amidst this catalogue of achievements, Uzma has also faced challenges along the way. The position of men in the community in regard to women studying and pursuing work remains an issue. Ironically, it is within her own family, in the figure of her younger brother, that this reality asserts itself. While she has clearly gained in stature and confidence, he continues to hold a certain level of control over her, prohibiting for instance from taking a mobile around. This distrustful, overbearing behaviour was illustrated by his brief cameo during my conversation with Uzma. He entered the room and reproachfully asked her “what are you saying?” after hearing her utter the word “brother”. At the same time, it has to be said that he made no effort to disrupt or monitor our conversation. Instead, just like the husbands and brothers who the women say “make fun of them” for attending classes at the centre, many men at this point are being pushed aside by women's drive for empowerment.

While her parents have been supportive of her work since the get go, Uzma admits that it has been far from smooth sailing with some of her other relatives. More specifically, she bemoans the fact that “my father's brother's family have stopped speaking to my whole family since I started the program...they think 'oh she goes here and there all the time’”. Just as I begin to ask a different question, she confidently interrupts me to make a further point: “my family is small...their family is much bigger. Maybe because of this...my parents could afford to keep me at school. Only I have got that chance to study”. Uzma recognises here that as hard as she has worked to build a life which is

yet imperfect, the reality is that many other young women, beyond her family, are still denied the chance to receive an education and build a life for themselves.

Keen to push herself further, Uzma recently applied for a position as a policewoman, passed the exam successfully and was offered a job. However, she explains, “I decided not to do it”. At this point, we can see the limits of her own life, with parents who are only willing to offer so much support. She explains that even when she went for “a training in Lucknow for the first time they were a little worried, hesitant...they worry about the environment I'm exposed to...but now I've been 4 times! So they are fine”. Yet the possibility of her being sent far away, as a policewoman, is too much. “They say don't go far...everyone started saying that they will send you far away. Very far away. No one said this is a good job...everyone thinks teaching is good, but this police job, no”. In the end though, Uzma does seem happy and excited to pursue her B.Ed. so she can eventually pursue full-time teaching, a job which she will undoubtedly do well. While she hasn't got round to it yet, she is comfortable in her parents' assurance that “if you want to study, you can...my dad encouraged me from before to 'study, study, none of us have studied’”. Parveen, Uzma's mother, who listened closely to our conversation and regularly offered helpful additions, was clearly proud of the work that her daughter is doing. “They [my parents] are happy with teaching...”, Uzma stated with a tranquil satisfaction, neatly encapsulating how her pride in her journey is tied with her parents' pride in her.

Teacher, Not Preacher

Chandani



As one of nine brothers and sisters, it is perhaps understandable that Chandani's parents “don't oppose it...and they don't support it”. While clearly not of the loud, bossy variety her wry sense of humour in this instance, provoking much laughter among the other facilitators, was an indication to me of the confidence and comfort she felt within this group of empowering women. When we spoke one-on-one, she was similarly soft-spoken yet witty, sharply firing back at my query about the possibility of a husband; “do I look like that to you?!”.

Chandani describes the initial challenges she faces with the older women she teaches, as they cling to their past, repeating the common nostalgic phrase of “in our time, it was like this”. It would be easy for her to be dismissive of these feelings, this resistance to change. Instead, she is thoughtful and patient, leading open discussions, rather than delivering patronising lectures, on a range of issues relating to women's rights, equality and empowerment over the first few sessions. In this way, they gradually begin to engage with different ideas and processes of change.

For instance, she gives them opportunities to share difficulties with their husband's opposition to their literacy learning, while offering additional advice. In fact, when necessary, she suggests to her

learners that their husbands visit the class, recounting how have come and quizzed her; “they ask what this is etc. and after, I explain to them and they accept it”. The bravery and ability to use this approach is impressive and bodes well for the development of new societal dynamics, as she convinces men who wield cultural, economic, and political capital over her (never mind that they are older in a society where the old are understood as beacons of wisdom and respect). Chandani also explains that while before “they would accept anything their husbands did...if their husbands hit them, they would just say 'it's his right to hit me', they now say 'you cannot do that. This is my right.' they understand themselves now as equals with the same rights'. This is mirrored by her own courage and assertion of self-worth in the face of the discrimination from the men around her, as she relates how “when my brother comes home from the field, he asks me to fetch him water...but these days I started responding 'I also went to work and am feeling tired, so why don't you get me water today?'

Similarly, she conducts both the literacy and life skill lessons in an integrated, practical manner. Two examples serve to illustrate this. When teaching the women numbers, Chandani explains that she “took the initiative to teach them how to write the numbers alongside”. This sort of combination method may appear simple and obvious in theory, but in practices teachers often feato taking such natives. This ability to write numbers is incredibly useful for women when filling out bank forms. In addition, when discussing the topic of 'cleanliness and hygiene', she has shown a similar ability to base her teaching within the arena of the women's concerns and needs. “Whenever their children come back from school they immediately say 'give me food'...so while referring to the poster I explain that there are so many germs get on children's hands...so make sure to wash them with soap before eating.” “In this way”, she elaborates, “they are able to put their life skill knowledge to real life use”. In fact, her fellow tutors often contact her when they are struggling to teach certain topics, deeply aware of her knowledge and maturity.

Apart from her role as centre facilitator in Karbalapurwa, Chandani worked as a teacher in a Hindi medium school. While she had been working in this role long before SSK initiated the functional literacy programme in the area, her plan until recently was to pursue nursing. Now, however, she has set her sights on becoming a policewoman, humorously remarking that “I shouldn't waste my height” (she is 170cm!) While other women have described their hesitancy at pursuing a job with its dangerous implication as well the as the potential for relocation, Chandani shows no fear. This is partly due to her independent, quietly ambitious worldly nature, keen to make the most of the opportunities she has been given and push herself out of her comfort zone. When you are settled and secure in a profession, would seem risky for many people. After getting to know her and watching her work on a consistent basis, it is clear that Chandani has the requisite patience, intelligence, and resilience to do so.

Making Doubts Disappear

Mehazabeen



When Mehazabeen first joined the program, people in her village were extremely sceptical of her work. She was overwhelmed by a constant barrage of disapproving questions and opinions: “What work is this? Is this any kind of job to be doing? She keeps going here and there...this is not right...is it necessary? she should quit...” Moreover, before even starting her first batch – during the recruitment process – locals warned her that the women she was taking the responsibility of teaching “don't listen to anyone”. Initially, Mehazabeen did indeed have to grapple with this challenge. The women that she had worked hard to recruit were resistant to learn as well as unreliable in attendance, with little motivation besides learning how to write own names; “we are so old – what's the point of studying?”. They supplemented these words of disinterest with complaints that they “have so much work...cleaning and other things to do”.

Nevertheless, with courage and conviction, Mehazabeen managed to slowly rise above this doom and gloom. One of the ways she was able to engage with the women was by emphasising that apart from the benefits for themselves, their children would benefit significantly too (both now and in the future). As she put it, “if you yourself don't know certain things, how will your children learn...”. In addition to this, when any of her learners didn't attend for 2-3 days at a time, she would visit their

homes to find out why they had been absent. She confidently recounted to me how on several occasions she had successful discussions with “husbands, brothers, fathers...and explained to them what they [the women] will learn and how it will benefit not only them but the whole family and wider community”.

Further, she was keen to clarify that apart from her own hard work, the women's development is also a result of their “willingness to listen and openness to change”. She explained that their hesitance at first was only natural considering how “unfamiliar the situation was for them”. Her sensitivity shining through, Mehazabeen added that she would have open discussions with the learners about the importance of what they could learn in these 4 months (both through basic literacy and knowledge of other issues).

As for the local community onlookers, Mehazabeen proudly recounted how after setting up the centre they quickly began to recognise that “good work was being done”. Excitedly detailing their responses, she explained that what they were most impressed by was that “she has come and made the choice to teach these older women...if women got this opportunity everywhere, they would become more empowered and every area of their lives would be improved...they would teach their children...and their whole family would be more satisfied”. To summarise, she quickly remarked “over there [Takpurwa] they are all very happy about the centre”. Part of what motivated her amidst all the initial negativity is “the extremely bad situation of Takpurwa”. Rather than framing this as a complaint, she recognises that tutoring and spreading awareness to women puts her in a position of extra responsibility as a 'change agent'. She relished this challenge, explaining that the difference between the beginning of the initial batch and now – as she begins her fourth batch – is tremendous.

Mehazabeen's role has not been limited to teaching the women functional literacy and spreading awareness on a variety of issues (e.g. family planning, hygiene practices). On one occasion, she took her learners on a visit to the district block in order to impress their rights upon them. For instance – she carefully explained – “in many cases people apply for a subsidy for building or purchasing a house but are not given it by the village panchayat head”. Thus, her role is to connect them to the BDO (Block Development Officer) who will then follow through with the subsidy payment, since “the village head only gives it to his own network...not to everyone”.

Finally, from a personal point of view, she emphasised that the opportunity to avail of a new identity, as a teacher and a community change agent, has helped develop her self-confidence and personality. She elaborated by explaining that she “feels relaxed there”, free from “being judged” since the women in Takpurwa “do not know her, and she does not know them”. Although she maintained that “in front of older people you still feel that hesitation”, it's different with those who don't know you and your family”. Mehazabeen chirpily described how “upon her arrival at the centre her learners often see her and go 'oh sister ji is here!', they feel that oh teacher has come...from afar”.

Wise Beyond Her Years

Neetu



Neetu was not one of those kids who complained about going to school counted down the minutes till they could go home. “School was good...I enjoyed it...there was nothing to complain about”, she remarked. However, this satisfaction was not borne out of a total acceptance or a carefree attitude or a mere unfussiness, but a deep desire to learn and make a name for herself. Neetu passionately remarked that “since I was a child, I had this feeling...this drive. I wanted to show what I can do. I wanted to build my own identity”.

“Around the age of 15, when I was in class 9”, Neetu elaborated, “this dream began to take its initial form”. After intensive days at school, she spent her afternoons “tutoring young children and learning how to tailor clothes”. She relished these early opportunities to demonstrate her ability to learn quickly, work hard and take responsibility. Delving deeper into the memories of this adolescent intensity, she giggled before shyly remarking that “I had this idea...when I was 15...that one day in the future I will become a great police officer...why not! But then later when I looked into it, I found that I was too short. I tried but it was not possible”.

It is easy to imagine these words spoken with regret and a sense of disappointment and frustration, but not even a flicker of this could be traced in Neetu's expressions and body language. The maturity with which she accepted that this ambition could not materialise shone through in her pointed remark that “look at my life now. How could I have any regrets...I feel grateful and proud of where I am today”. While this positivity and eagerness to focus on the present is commendable, it is important to recognise that the narrative of her life is not quite as smooth as it would appear from the vantage point of the present, where she is happy and free of regrets. Hinting at this, she admitted that “I got the idea to pursue a B.Ed. after joining the program.” Considering the disappointment, she must have faced at not being able to become a police woman, it is therefore understandable that she remarked that “my life has really changed since I got the chance to be a facilitator at the centre”.

When I posed the question as to how and why this has contributed so much to her growth, since she was a good student and clearly possesses the qualities to do well in life, she quickly explained it as a question of “confidence...I was shy”. A feature of many of the facilitator's growth, Neetu emphasised that “it's not a question of being clever or hard working or responsible...you need a chance. I always had that strong desire and ambition. But I needed an opportunity to show it...to get that encouragement and belief”.

She sees this same desire and seizing an opportunity in the women she teaches. “Of course, at the beginning they were unsure...but as they come more and more, they become really satisfied. Some of them are stopped from coming by their husband...but they make a big effort to show him. Even from just seeing that she can write her name, the husband will change his mind. Some of them still say no and they fight, but they come anyway. They have so much desire to learn”.

From a wider perspective, beyond everything that she herself and all her learners have gained, Neetu believes this program also has an indirect impact on other people in the local community. She explains, “Let's take my centre. When I am teaching every day then those people around there see...they look with interest and respect. They understand that even women of these older ages have a desire and commitment to learn. This starts conversations and challenges mindsets...this is change.”

Old Old, But I Enrolled

Kamla



Among all the learners at Afsana's centre, Kamla stuck out. While her attitude to learning was serious and consistent, her manner of speaking was almost teenage-like, full of silliness and irreverence. From this short space of time, it was easy to assume that as she closes in on the ripe age of 60 – the average life span of women in this area – she is riding one last high in a satisfying life. In reality, this could not be further from the truth.

At one point during our conversation at her house, Kamla summarised the lowest point in a life full of hardships with the words “in 5 years, 5 people from my family died”. Going into more detail, she recounted how “when my youngest son was in class 4, my husband died...a year after my youngest son also died. Soon after, my brother died too. Then my mother in-law...and my sister-in-law...misery...so much misery”. Her parents had come to an end a few years earlier.

Of her two sons who are alive, one suffers from polio while the other one migrates for most of the year in order to find work. Her granddaughter offered a further insight into her father's situation, explaining that “he was here briefly during the winter, but left 10 days ago because he couldn't find

work...in desperation he has to go to Delhi and other places”. She explains that none of her children attended school due to the terrible circumstances, especially losing her husband as the provider for the family. She sadly remarked that perhaps their “destiny was sealed then”. In short, even her one son who was lucky enough to stay in good health has struggled, suffering the effects of multiple family tragedies. This puts into perspective the desperate reality of migrated workers, not only forced to lead a precarious, lonely life but also leaving behind a family full of people in need.

Within this context, it is unsurprising that Kamla gets so much pleasure from attending the literacy centre. “I feel good when I am in the centre. Learning letters but also spending quality time with women from my community”, she remarks, reminding us that a literacy centre provides rural women not only with a skill that is their fundamental right, but with something to enjoy. In lives so often filled with sorrow, this is not something to dismiss. This is particularly relevant at her age, when the narrative of life means work is behind her and her potential “for learning is limited. Yet, I still keep trying.”

On the other hand, Kamla's poor eyesight that affects her reading (her notebook is full of writing, but she has a tough time reading) is something that can be transformed. Learning from the program that a free eye test and subsidised glasses are available from the local government hospital, she looks forward to gaining full clarity of vision once again. In addition, through the exposure visit to the bank and police station she has learned how to enrol in a pension scheme, having regrettably never received any sort of pension money before. “Excited to learn how it works” before the visit, she is now all set to fill out the form with the help of her centre facilitator in the coming weeks and secure what is rightfully hers.

Apart from the plight of her nearest and dearest, Kamla herself has had personal troubles, struggling for the past 5 years with the after effects of a multiple head injuries caused by two separate collisions, one with a motorcycle and later another with a buffalo. When I asked her how she managed to overcome these challenges, she herself seemed unsure, thinking before reasoning that she just “kept going...day by day my mind would just push me to keep moving forward”. Similarly, when prompted on her memories from her childhood, she responded “what should I remember? It was tough”. After spending much of her adulthood grieving, she is keen to focus on the present and the future, asserting that “I tell all my granddaughters and other young female relative to study. I shout at them to go to school and stop worrying about me.” In any case, she triumphantly declared, “I will not die any time soon”.

Born to Read? Born to Lead!

Draupadi



Draupadi was sitting quietly in the courtyard of her house when Anita (her centre facilitator) arrived and started chatting to her about her life, her family, and her educational qualifications. Pausing for a moment at in reaction to the mention of education, Draupadi calmly explained that “asking me anything related to education is pointless”. After Anita mentioned to her that a functional literacy centre will soon be established in the village, Draupadi volunteered her own house as a suitable location for the centre. Since she is a ward member, she suggested that it will be convenient for local women to gather here, and Anita agreed.

On the other hand, what made this conversation hilarious was that Draupadi herself refused to enrol. Even though the centre facilitator and other community women kept requesting her to join them, she insisted that she was too occupied with housework and her ill husband who requires a lot of assistance.

However, as the days rolled by, it proved too difficult for her to ignore what was taking place inside her own home. Initially observing the sessions at a glance when she passed from her room, she later

started sitting with the learners on occasion, participating in educational games and gaining awareness from the discussions. With three weeks having passed since the centre's establishment, Draupadi officially enrolled herself. To mark this climactic moment, a community meeting was organised by a member of the program staff where she was introduced by Anita, the centre facilitator.

Following her introduction, Draupadi assertively remarked: “I am a completely illiterate person but have received exposure to certain things due to my position as a ward member. I have often visited bigger cities. But in reality, even after holding such a position, we are puppets and are not able to take any stand regarding our rights and responsibilities. We are asked to sign the meeting minutes but have no idea what has been written on the paper.”

On probing further about why she refused to take admission at first, before later changing her mind, she replied: “I thought that it might not benefit me and that with the responsibility of taking care of my husband, giving 2-3 hours at the centre would disturb my whole schedule. But when I observed that the other women are learning so much and enhancing their basic literacy skills, I couldn't stop myself.”

In a regretful manner, she also shared that “for my husband's treatment I needed financial support because whatever my son earns is spent on necessities. For this reason, I thought the centre maintenance amount would be a great support to me and that is why I proposed to establish it here. But now it is not the only concern for me, as I enjoy learning the things taught by Ms. Anita.”

She went on to share that earlier on her life was a real struggle as she had five children and managing their studies was a tough task for her. Due to her husband's health, her son migrated to earn money in bigger cities, withdrawing from school. Giving her children an education was a dream for her. While she had encouraged her daughters to at least pass high school, eventually due to all the struggles she married off her elder daughter and as well as the other two after getting good proposals. Explaining this further, she remarked that a good proposal for her family was one from a family with decent income and asked for less dowry. However, she now realises that this kind of marriage promotes dowry and gives births to many atrocities against women.

Swelling with emotion, Draupadi admitted that the centre seems to be the only place where she can escape from all her sorrows and feel confident in herself. Her centre fellows described her as “a powerful personality because even after her struggles she has taken the initiative to solve

problems in the village”. Going forward, Draupadi wishes to improve her literacy skills so that she is able to articulate her points more effectively in Gram Sabha meetings. Her younger daughter, who is illiterate, has been inspired by her mother's achievements.

After just two months, it is amazing how far Draupadi has come. She gathers the women every day and starts off the class by writing something on the blackboard. She explained that I have now become so aware and try to complete my household chores before the centre time and remind other women to join me there on time. She proudly related how her husband always listen to the discussions and takes an interest in learning too. She added that he is the driving force behind all her achievements.

Currently, Draupadi is associated with SSK under a family planning program, serving the community as a Family Planning Champion. She had gained an awareness of this subject as part of the life skill component at the FLC. In her new role, she encourages youths, newly married couples and other community women to adopt family planning methods. Because of her dedication and passion, we decided that she would be perfect for this role. She has a powerful voice and an unwavering will to work towards the welfare of community women.

She can't Hear, But She'll be all Write

Tara



“She didn't go to school...all my other children did”, her mother, Anita, sorrowfully admits. Tara, her daughter, has suffered from partial deafness since an early age. However, Anita added, “I did try to send her to school too...but the teachers said she was not normal and that they needed a note from a doctor in order to teach her...but I did not know about these things”. Thus, owing to Tara's condition, and the inability of her mother to visit a hospital, isolated as rural women are from these institutions, Tara was kept at home and involved in housework while her four sisters and two brothers attended primary school. Nevertheless, Anita proudly asserted that “this wasn't so bad...she works very well at what she can do. we don't need to tell her anything even...she just does it. She is able to do it all”.

When I asked her about the challenges Tara has faced due to her deafness, Anita insisted that the first time she faced difficulties with other people was “when she got married and had to deal with her in-laws”. She elaborated by saying that the “in-laws would push her buttons a lot...they found it hard to communicate with her...so in the end it didn't work out...after a short time, they got rid of her”. While such difficulties can certainly be imagined, it is noteworthy that Tara had little to no interaction with society outside of her family while growing up. Not only would she have been unable to develop those

interpersonal skills which are in any case hindered by her deafness, but her and her mother would not have experienced any moments of structural discrimination until Tara's ill-fated marriage.

The famous philosopher Voltaire, who suffered from age-related hearing loss, once remarked that “the consolation of deaf people is to read, and sometimes to scribble”. Sitting and watching Tara at the centre, her body language a mix of concentration and satisfaction, it really does seem that she has found her consolation. While the deaf and dumb are equally capable (in terms of potential) of reading and writing as their hearing peers, it does require an immense amount of extra effort. Tara embodies this commitment and desire to learn against the odds.

Reading and writing must here be understood as not merely an exercise of vision and touch, both gifts which Tara possesses. Reading can be understood better as the ability to understand how the structure of speech sounds in a spoken language are embedded in the written word. Phonology, the technical term for these speech sounds, are more or less unavailable to Tara. How is she therefore able to overcome this obstacle? Experts attribute this partly to an increased ability to lip-read amongst deaf people, observing the movement of mouths to distinguish one sound from another. On close observation, Tara makes clearly makes use of this ability.

Knowledge circulation about deaf people focuses on their deficiencies, with relatively little appreciation of their achievements in the face of adversity. Parental communication, a significant contributor to the ability to develop language, is something Tara unfortunately did not receive. While her mother is supportive of her, as detailed above, she is barely able to communicate with her. She does, however, recognise that Tara deserves the opportunity to become literate and participate in her community, remarking that “I am happy for her to go...why should I not be. She learns a lot and I am pleased. She writes so much in her notebook...she does all the work. She is able.”

Reading and writing are especially crucial for someone whose world is narrowed by hearing and speaking losses, enabling such a person to exchange information and ideas and develop relationships that would otherwise be out of reach. Society also deserves the increased opportunity to get to know the thoughts, feelings, and ideas of those who uniquely experience the world primarily through sight. Hopefully, as Tara continues to learn how to read and write, she will gain opportunities to be independent and express herself in ways that have been cruelly denied to her from a very early age.

In the future, with increasing technology and its possibilities for communication, the ability to read and write will be incredibly useful for Tara and other deaf people in developing relationships and interactions undreamed of even a decade ago...

Mind Over Matter, Soul Before Flesh

Saira



Like many learners, 22-year old Saira was completely illiterate in Hindi before joining the literacy centre (Laddupur). Unlike any of the other women, however, she did in fact receive several years of education. As a student at a local madrasa, she attended classes in Urdu until the 8th grade. She explained that she enjoyed studying so much that she herself ended up a teacher at the madrasa. After proudly stating this, Saira elaborated that she always had “a studious nature” and therefore was “excited by the chance to learn how to read and write in Hindi”.

It is worth pointing out that is that she is possibly the only learner at any of the 15 centres who has to manage the responsibility of a job outside the home along with considerable housework and attendance at her local centre. Yet, what makes her story truly remarkable, is that this is without even taking into account the weight of difficulties she faces due to the flaccid paralysis (caused by polio) she has suffered from since an early age. The depth of her feat is further evident from the fact that even before enrolling at the centre, she would the leave the house far more than most able-bodied community women in her work as a teacher at the local madrasa. Finally, on top of all this;

she has now become the stand-out learner at the Laddupur FLC, her hard work and independent studying reflected in her impressive reading ability.

Her centre facilitator Archana excitedly remarked that “it has been such a special experience having Saira as part of her centre”. Archana described how she had shown this spirit and maturity right from the beginning, as the first one to enrol, playing a key role in getting other community women to join and encouraging them to make the most of their learning. She explains that besides three of her sister-in-law's, Saira was able to persuade some of the women to join “because many of their children have studied under me at the madrasa...so they trust me”. She has grown to the extent that at this point halfway through the 4-month batch, she has become a quasi-leader of the FLC. When Archana was hesitant to leave the centre for a few minutes to speak to us, Saira swiftly interrupted, re-assuring us all by calmly asserting “I will take charge...you go. I will be there.” Archana echoed this reality, stating that “when she comes, everyone else comes!”.

When observing and interacting with Saira, it is clear that she genuinely enjoys the act of learning. Even though she recognises its potential benefits in the future, it is the pleasure of challenging her mind and accumulating skills that shines through in her case. Her reluctance to connect her attitude and performance to her disability, or to complain about it, reflects her desire to focus on the gift of her mind rather than the misfortune of her body. She heartily remarked that “it will be very useful going forward...when I go somewhere. At the moment, I do not have the heart to go to places outside my village...but now I am learning a lot...it is good, right”.

Saira is incredibly grateful for her parent's support, explaining that “my mother and father have done so much for me...and they are very happy with me. This harmony in her family environment, and how it has boosted her through the hardships of her life, are clear.” Finally, she is keen to put out a clear message for everyone who cares about the empowerment of women: “Even the girls who get to go to school...when they get older, they don't get sent to school. They get married off so young... girls get married by the age of 15. Children after 1 or 2 years...they should definitely wait till 18 years old. If girls do not get to go to school how will their children get to go...is this not true? My parents really support me...we are all happy together. I wish other girls get the same experience. They deserve it.”

Nothing can Stop Me

Renu



As a young girl, Renu begged to be sent to school. However, her mother dismissed the possibility, responding to her pleas by saying “what is the point of you studying...how will you go and get a job later on?” This is the stark reality for most rural women, destined to stay at home for life while their father, and later their husband, venture into the outside world to earn a livelihood. In the worst cases, this destiny is finalised when a girl is married off as a mere teenager.

Renu, a naturally confident speaker, nevertheless hesitated when remarking that “when I suddenly got married...even that was not there...which makes babies.” Married before she'd even got her first period, at the age of 12, she soon after had her first child. Acknowledging the link between a high number of children and child marriage, she explained that as one of 11 siblings, and even more significantly, one of 9 daughters, her parents felt pressure to get her married off quickly. At that point in time, almost 20 years ago, the police were constantly on the look-out for child marriages, she added. The emotional turmoil Renu went through at such a young age was severe, with her mum repeatedly warning her not to “tell anyone or you will get in trouble”.

As Renu grew into an adult, she slowly gained awareness of what she had missed out on as a child. She described one of these revelatory experiences, when she visited a government hospital a couple of years ago, as such: “I went to get some medicine...and was given 3 receipts for my purchase...I had them in my hand and I asked some people for help...I asked them 'can you see what names they are? I want to know the name of the medicines...' and they were like 'we don't know'...for the rest of that day I thought...if only I knew how to read, I wouldn't have to rely on other people, I could do it on my own easily.”

Thus, it is little surprise that after hearing about the literacy centre being established in her village, Renu jumped at the chance to enrol. While she enjoyed it from the beginning, getting a thrill from even learning how to recognise basic letters, her husband was not so enthusiastic. She explains that 'at the start he sometimes refused to let me go...he even beat me once'. He would complain that “you are talking such big things and talking so much. you are going to study and leaving the children...for what?”. Not only did Renu keep attending, when she could have easily shrunk under her husband's fist, but she has even managed to gain his support, asserting that now “he listens and is even interested in some things I have learned”. In fact, she even recounts this mini narrative in the presence of her husband, who shows no interest in interrupting or challenging her words, confirming this remarkable change.

As much as she has learned at the centre, admitting that “before I didn't know anything”, Renu is still not satisfied. For this reason, she relates how “even after the other women leave...I continue to sit with Chandani to see if I am doing this and that right...how to join these two letters...how to improve”. She is very clear about what fuels this motivation, asserting “I don't want to always be reliant on someone else's help. If I am able to help myself, it will be good for me. I will get some sort of independence.”

Furthermore, this motivation is not limited to her own personal progress. Renu explained that after finishing her batch, inspired by the great work her centre facilitator Chandani does, she offered to help recruit women. She says that “it's difficult to convince women to leave their homes...but I am trying. I explain that you get a lot of information about things, such as how to maintain cleanliness in the house”. She emphasises that basic hygiene is sorely missing, with people spreading germs through easily avoidable habits such as “using their hands to wipe runny noses”. Amidst all this, after a long day where she hurriedly finishes her mountain of chores, eats lunch, and attends the centre, Renu comes home and helps her younger children learn to read and write.

As a final message, Renu passionately asserted that “I never got a chance to study...you shouldn't end up like me. A child's life shouldn't be disrupted the way mine was...they should be able to keep going...on their own path...their own way.”

Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra

SSK strives for a society which is based on equity and justice. It focuses its interventions on the marginalised and excluded sections of society, aiming to strengthen and organise them by enhancing their participation in the process of their own development. In order to promote this philosophy of development, SSK attempts to build the capacities of various community-based organisations civil society organisations. It is a support organisation that hopes to play an active role in impacting the lives of the poor and marginalised communities.

Korean National Commission for UNESCO

Korean National Commission for UNESCO was founded on 30 January 1954. The Commission is actively working to further strengthen existing cooperative relationships with its stakeholders at the national, regional, and international levels and to take its share of responsibility in pursuing the goals of UNESCO in Korea. As a focal point, the Korean National Commission for UNESCO is also committed to creating partnerships and networking with not only governments, and other international and intergovernmental organisations, but with civil society and the private sector.

KNCU – Bridge Asia Programme

The Korean National Commission for UNESCO's Bridge Asia Programme is supported by the Ministry of Education and individual donors from the Republic of Korea. The Bridge Asia Programme aims to improve the quality of life of marginalised populations in South Asia by empowering them through non-formal education. To achieve this end, the Korean National Commission for UNESCO (KNCU) works in partnership with Bunyad Literacy Council in Pakistan, the Ministry of Education of Bhutan, the National Institute of Education in Sri Lanka, the Nepal National Commission for UNESCO, Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra in India, and the UNESCO Bangkok Office.



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