

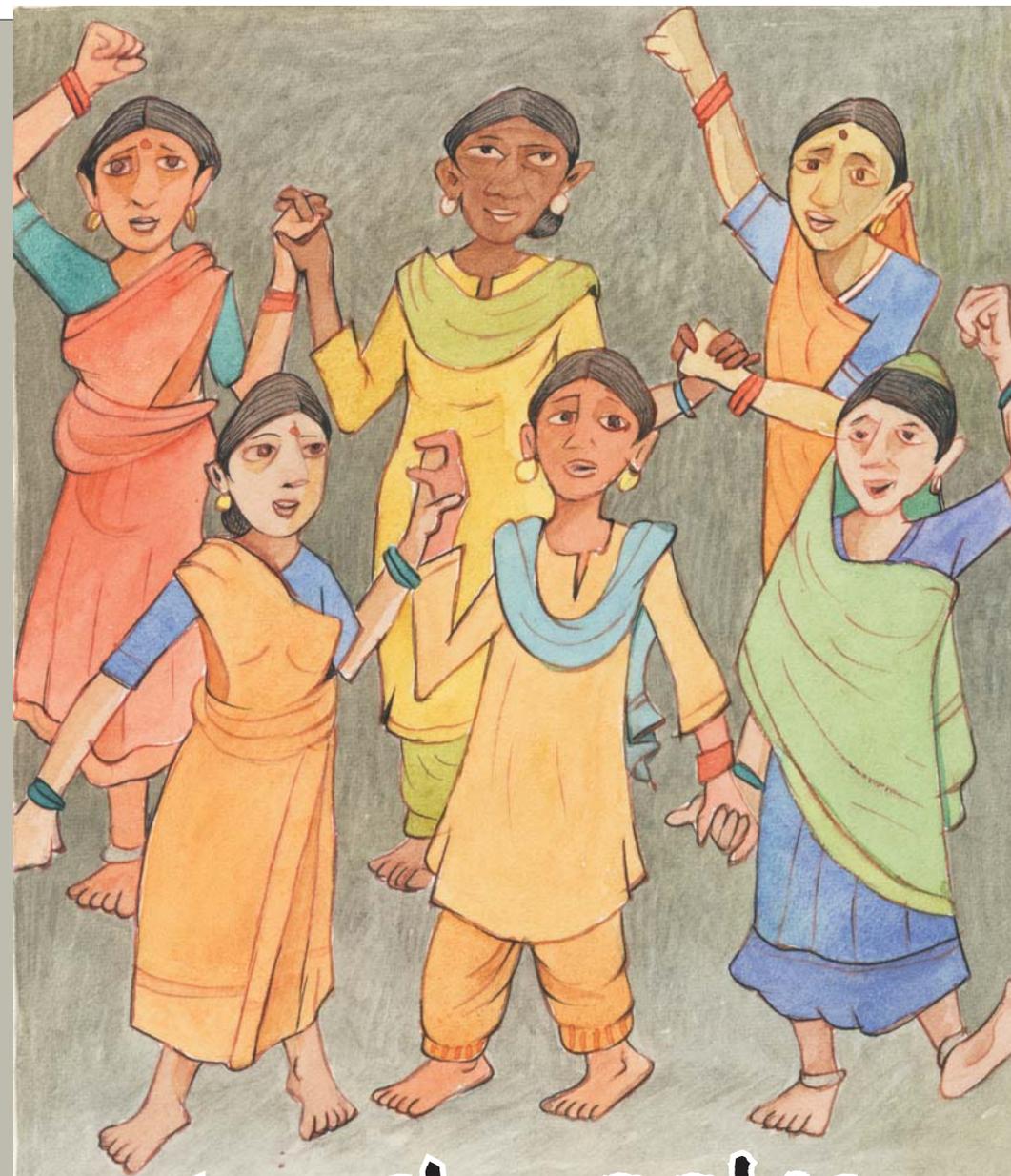
Our Struggles, Our Lives...

This book is an attempt to capture the struggles of single women from various parts of India. These real life stories bring to the fore a host of problems that plague single women. But at the same time they are also testimonies to their unmatched strength and courage. They talk of the strength of Sangathan - organisation, of coming together and standing up for their rights, of solidarity and sisterhood.

Taking their struggle to a new level, women leaders representing over 50,000 low income single women from eight states of India came together in October 2009 to form the National Forum for Single Women's Rights. This book marks that momentous occasion. Through the National Forum, single women seek to work with the Government of India and with the larger society for the rights and entitlements of single women across the nation. They seek to strengthen state-wide associations of single women and make the National Forum a platform to share experiences, learn from each other and forge ahead on their way to a tomorrow that brings equality, justice and freedom for all.



**National Forum For Single Women's Rights
India**



**our struggles,
our lives**

"OUR STRUGGLES, OUR LIVES"

True stories of the lives of
Indian Single Women



**National Forum for Single Women's Rights
Rashtriya Ekal Nari Adhikar Manch**

Our Struggles, our Lives

Recording by :

Organizing Committee, National Forum for Single Women's Rights
With the support of single women groups/organization

Compilation by:

Secretariat, National Forum for Single Women's Rights

Editing by :

Manju Sharma

Translation into English by :

Abhinav Dutt

Support :

Support Group, National Forum for Single Women's Rights

Cover Design by :

Prashant Soni

Typing and Setting by:

Rajkumar Jalora

Published :

October 2009
Udaipur, Rajasthan, India

Publisher :

National Forum for Single Women's Rights
Rashtriya Ekal Nari Adhikar Manch
Secretariat : 39, Kharol Colony,
Udaipur - 313004 (Raj.), India
Contact Persons : Dr.Ginny Shrivastava,
Anu Verma, Parul Chaudhary
Phone : 91 294 2451348
Fax : 91 294 2451391
Email : natforum09@gmail.com

PREFACE

Upon opening this book, the reader is about to move amongst the stories of the lives of remarkably strong women of India. The stories are not “nice” stories – they tell of human cruelty, of wicked superstition, of systemic corruption, of age-old cruel caste customs. Women discarded, abandoned, murdered.

But generally, women have survived, and brought up their children, through the sweat and blood of their labour. They are strong women, not weak women!

The reader will also discover that in several states of India, there are “Sangathans”, “Associations”, “Societies” – organizations of single women helping each other. Where such organizations have reached, collective action has generally improved the situation – corruption has been reduced, and women have new self-confidence.

“Today, on my own, I take decisions that concern me and I have no more fears while fighting for my rights”.
“She is now determined to live her life on her own terms.”

The women in these case studies are of various ages and communities – not all widows or abandoned women are old – you will read of a 10-year-old widow! Problems exist in Hindu Communities, in Muslim Communities, in Sikh Communities, in Tribal Communities – in all Communities. Unfortunately, marginalization of single women is nation-wide – and this book stands as a statement that the myth that “the Indian family looks after

¹ According to the 2001 census, 7.4% of the female population of India are “single”. There were 3,43,89,729 widows in India, and 23,42,930 divorced / separated women – a total of 3,67,32,659 single women – well over 36 million

its own in times of trouble” is just that, a myth. That is not to say that there are no single women who are cared for well by their family members, but with well over 36 million single women in India, there are millions of single women whose lives are a constant struggle.

We have put this book of case studies together, in October 2009, at the time when single women of India have come together to form a National Forum for Single Women's Rights. The book will continue to be read, long after the 2-day programme to inaugurate the National Forum is over. Hopefully, the women's stories will motivate those working with women in the bastis, the villages, the hamlets, the mountains, the plains, the deserts – NGO workers, government programme people, women community based organizations. We all should realize that there are large numbers of single women, often invisible, who have not been included in the Women's Movement / Women's Development action going on.

We have also put this book together, in the hope that from the women's stories, it will be clear that what these women need is 'Organization' – not 'Ashrams'! The organization of single women, into large associations with knowledgeable and aware leadership, brings new self confidence, solutions to problems – and an “alternate family” to the natal and the marital family, both of which usually abandon their widowed, deserted, abandoned, unmarried female relatives. There are already examples of such organizations, in Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, Bihar and Gujarat, and others are getting ready to move! Please note that the case studies of women who are members of single women's organizations, end quite differently than those case studies where there is no organization!

Hopefully, the reader will be able to know, not just what happened, but also the feelings of the women experiencing the life events. Their stories of vulnerability, and strength; of desperation

and courage, need to be heard – and society must act on what it hears. Governments must respond with increased resources targeting single women; caste and community customs must change; sons, daughters-in-law, natal and marital family members, relatives, and neighbours must listen and understand; the media must report; and single women themselves who read or hear these case studies, must get organized to help each other, and to fight for their right to live with dignity!

And when they do so, not only will they benefit – we all will. The human resources presently locked up in these millions of women will contribute to a better tomorrow for all Indians.

At least, that is our hope, and our belief.

Ginny Shrivastava

CONTENTS

1. My Strength, My Family: “Sangathan”	1
2. After a Life of Giving, at Age 70 She Has no Support	5
3. Justice Through the Courts - a Long Wait	7
4. Fighting Life's Lonely Battle	9
5. When She Refused to Give In, They Declared Her a Witch	12
6. The Sangathan is her Strength	15
7. Living on the Brink	19
8. When Brothers Turn Enemy	21
9. A Life Sacrificed on the Altar of Tradition	23
10. Breaking Free from Exploitation	25
11. “How will I manage to survive the coming day?”	27
12. When Lives Have No Value – Naxal Violence and Police Inaction	29
13. Not Alone Anymore	32
14. I want My House Back: To make it my Home once again!	34
15. In a Country of a Billion, a Single Woman is Often All Alone	36
16. Eternal Courage	38
17. The End of a Dream	41
18. Sangathan Exposes Corruption wit the Right to Information	43
19. Raped and Battered, She Refuses to Give Up	47
20. A Good for Nothing Husband – Not Wanted	51
21. Driven From Her Home	55
22. Bringing Hope to Others	59

women from all over Gujarat gathered for the first meeting, Renuka was chosen to be the Chairperson for this Forum. Most of the Women in the Forum are single, widowed or separated; the Forum works towards strengthening them.

Renuka is now well settled, but she is anxious about her sons' future. Will she be able to provide for their higher education? She has resolved to give her children every opportunity possible. Renuka now has to take the Second Line medicines for HIV/AIDS. The government of India does not make these medicines available free of cost. These medicines are available in the market but at a very high price. The cost of these medicines for a month is Rs.6,000. Renuka's medicines are being made available by a donor, but she worries about all the other people who too are in need of these medicines, but cannot afford to buy them. Their life chances decrease considerably.

Renuka feels her struggle is still not over. She is all set to campaign that the government provide free Second Line medicines to those in need!!!



My Strength, My Family: “Sangathan”¹

Jamila Banu

Village: Moras

Block: Pindwara

District: Sirohi, Rajasthan

Jamila was 18 years old when she was married to Arif Khan, a resident of Kotra in Udaipur District, Rajasthan. Jamila had thought that her marriage would mark the beginning of a new phase of life for her. She had woven a lot of dreams around her fiancée and had hoped for a life lived “happily ever after”. What she had not thought was that her marriage would end in a month. On the night of the marriage Jamila's husband did not come home. She learnt that he had gone to another woman. All of Jamila's dreams came crashing down. She felt humiliated and cheated. Overwhelmed with grief and anger, Jamila did not open the door when her husband returned in the morning. Arif wasn't affected much by this. He continued to go to the other woman. He would come home drunk and would refuse to talk to Jamila. Jamila did not know what to do; Arif's attitude was making it difficult for her to stay with her in-laws. After a month of being married, Jamila returned to her parents' home. For 3 years, she stayed with her parental family with the hope that one day, Arif would come to take her to his home, but this did not happen. After three years Arif finally divorced Jamila.



Jamila's family thought “For how long could she stay in her natal home without causing the society to raise eyebrows?”. Jamila, embittered by her first experience of matrimony, did not want to marry again but her family was insistent. They arranged a second

¹ “Sangathan” is a Hindi word, meaning Organization, Association. It carries the meaning of a large group, and a group that is also involved in struggle through collective action

match for her. Jamila was married to Abid Khan. Jamila moved to Abid's home in Bicchiwara in the Jhadol Block of Udaipur District.

As it had become difficult to find employment in Bicchiwara, Abid and Jamila moved to Kotra Block in search of work. They rented a room and Jamila once again tried to create a home for herself. Abid would come back late at night. When Jamila would ask him where he had been, he would fight with her and say that she had no right to question him. For Jamila the nightmare seemed to have begun again. One day Abid Khan didn't return. Jamila was new to the place they were staying in, and she was afraid of being alone at night. All night long she sat up and waited for Abid but he did not come. She tried to tell herself that he must have gone for some work, but when Arif didn't return for 15 days, Jamila's last hopes died. The food items they had purchased had finished. She did not have the money to buy anything; and soon, the landlord would come to demand rent.

Jamila phoned her brother and explained to him the situation she was living in. Her brother came and took her home. Jamila was aware of her own family's poverty, and knew that even the burden of one extra mouth to feed was too much for them. The realization that she was pregnant, added to her worries. She started looking for her husband. After a few days, she found out that her husband was working at a bakery in Udaipur. She was happy to finally know his whereabouts. She was hopeful that the news of her pregnancy would cause a change of heart in him, and that Abid would take her back again. Accompanied by her younger brother she went to see Abid. But Abid refused to meet her. After a lot of persuasion, he agreed, but no good came out of this meeting. Abid told Jamila, "I have no relationship with you, nor do I want to have any kind of relationship with you!" When Jamila told Abid that she was pregnant, Abid's response was "If you give birth to a son, let me know. If it is a girl, then don't bother; we already have too many girls in the family."

Jamila went back. She lived in constant terror of giving birth to a girl. She prayed to Allah to grant her this one wish and give her a son. Jamila worked as an agriculture labourer on other people's fields in order to support herself. Her husband or her in-laws did not extend any support. Jamila would work hard all day and barely get enough to eat, and in

addition, her body was also bearing the burden of the child she carried.

Nine months later a girl was born to Jamila. Her family informed her in-laws of the delivery but no one turned up. Weak from the delivery and barely conscious, Jamila was too tired to even grieve the rejection. 20-days after the delivery, the baby became sick. Jamila took her to a hospital at Abu Road but the baby did not survive. The hospital refused to release the dead body as Jamila had not paid the bills. She mortgaged the anklets that she was wearing for 500 Rupees and it was only then that the baby's body was released. She sent news of her daughter's death to her husband and in-laws. They had not been concerned about her birth; her death did not move them either. Jamila and her family waited for a day for the baby's father to come but when he did not turn up, they performed the last rites. As Jamila looked on at her daughter being buried she decided that she would never go back to her husband. For so many months she had prayed day and night to be reunited with this heartless man who could not be bothered even to bury his daughter. She would not do so any more. For her, he was now as good as dead.

Now Jamila was all alone.

She had stopped hoping for a better life. Life as a single woman was difficult for her. The heart wrenching story of her life would become fodder for gossip and insinuations against her character. When she moved out of the house for work, she had to face both sexual harassment and social ridicule. Once when Jamila went to the compounder to take an injection that the doctor had prescribed, he exploited her under the guise of a physical examination! Jamila kept trying to tell him that she had already been to the doctor and all that the compounder needed to do was to give her the injection. But the compounder knowing that Jamila was alone and would be too ashamed to tell anyone, did not listen to her. Such violation of her body caused her great anger, but having been brought up to be meek and submissive, she did not know what to do.

Once a woman called Varju Bai came to Jamila's village. She had a meeting with the women of the village. Jamila sat quietly in the back. Varju told the women about the Association of Strong Women Alone (Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan), Rajasthan. Jamila continued to

attend these meetings regularly. But in all the meetings, she would only sit quietly. Once Varju asked her, “Why are you always so quiet?” Jamila told Varju her story. On learning about Jamila's case, Varju told her that the Rajasthan State Commission for women was organizing a public hearing in Abu Road, a nearby town, and that Jamila should present her case there. It was an act of great courage for Jamila to talk about her misery in front of so many people. Her case was discussed in the public hearing and the very next day her photograph and story appeared in the local newspaper.

The news of this also reached Jamila's in-laws. They immediately came to Jamila and requested her to return to their home with them. But Jamila had had enough of their mistreatment and abuse. She told them she wanted to have no more contact with them. The in-laws returned all the things that Jamila had brought with her at the time of her marriage -- and Jamila's second marriage also ended in a divorce.

Jamila had become a member of the Association of Strong Women Alone. With the help of the Association, she took literacy training and cleared the 8th standard exams, given privately as a student of the Open School. She became active in the work of the Association. She had gained self-confidence, and now recognized her own strength. Association with the Strong Women Alone also helped her become well informed. She says that after joining the Association, she is not afraid any more.

Jamila's is the only Muslim family in the village. Initially, Jamila and her three brothers used to stay together. But her brothers were always afraid for their safety and security and they feared that the other people in the village would occupy their land. Because of this, all of the brothers moved away but Jamila refused to move. Today she stays on her own in the village Moras. She is not afraid, and for the past seven years, she has been staying peacefully in the village. The villagers respect her because she is always ready to help them. She tells them about their rights and government entitlements. Jamila has spread the work of the Association of Strong Women Alone to two other Blocks in nearby Sirohi District - Pindwara and Shivganj. She is also a State Committee Member of the Association. She tells the members,

“I am not alone, the Association is my family, my friend!!”

After a Life of Giving, at Age 70 She Has no Support

Rajpati Devi

Village: Usari Bazar

Block: Baikunthpur

District: Gopalganj, Bihar

70 year old Rajpati is suffering from Tuberculosis. She can get free treatment from the government hospital but she is unable to go there. The government hospital is 10 kilometers away from her village. Rajpati's ill-health and old age don't allow her to walk the distance. Going there by a rickshaw would cost her 75 Rupees which she can't afford. Old, ill and weak, Rajpati is not in a condition any more to work as a daily wage labourer. In the name of her marital ancestral property, there was a house which was divided among Rajpati's husband and his four brothers. After the death of her husband, his share was further divided among Rajpati's six sons. She lives in a small part of this house which is in the name of two of her youngest sons.

Rajpati's husband died 30 years ago. At the time of his death, five out of their eight children had been married. Since then, Rajpati has laboured not only for herself but also for her three younger children. Today they are all married and have independent households. Not one of her eight children is ready to take responsibility for her now that she can't support herself anymore. Her six sons who live in the same village are not ready to let her stay with them. With nowhere to go, Rajpati was forced to ask the Panchayat² to intervene with her sons on her behalf. The Panchayat asked her sons to take care of her, and under pressure from the community, the sons unwillingly agreed that they would keep their mother for one month each and would provide her food and clothes.

Shifting from one son's household to another every month Rajpati manages to get enough food to keep body and soul together.

² “Panchayat” refers to the elected members of the local Village Council

The care that she needs because of her T.B. and declining health she feels is too much to expect from her sons who begrudge even the two square meals a day she eats. They don't provide her with clothes or pay for her medical needs when needed. At this stage of life, Rajpati needs the love and support of her family members, but she is all alone. She has lost faith in all relationships as even her own children have failed her.

Disappointed and saddened by her sons' behavior, Rajpati requested the village head to arrange the Old Age or Widow Pension for her. Harendra, a person from the village, took her thumb impression on some paper promising to arrange the pension for her. Six months later he handed over 500 Rupees to Rajpati and told her he was keeping the rest because, he said, completing various formalities for the work had cost him money. Since then she has not received any pension from this government scheme.

Despite being poor, Rajpati does not have a BPL card and thus does not receive any benefit from government schemes meant for citizens like her. On occasion, she gets some assistance in the form of fruits, medicines and clothes from a social development organization named Pragati Shilpkala Sansthan. But for sustenance she needs regular assistance that is guaranteed through government schemes meant for people in her situation.

In 2009 March she came in contact with Single Women's Struggle Society (Ekal Nari Sangharsh Samiti), Bihar and participated in the first convention organized by it. There she met many women who too were in a situation like her. After attending that convention and getting associated with the Society, Rajpati hopes that she and other women like her will, through the Society, be able to access their government entitlements, and by helping each other, find solutions to their woes.



Justice Through the Courts – a Long Wait!

Kanta Devi

Village: Nonni

Block: Sadar

District: Bilaspur, Himachal Pradesh

Kanta Devi got married in 2000. After only a few days of being married, her husband started mistreating her for not bringing enough dowry. He would play his tape recorder on full volume while he beat Kanta, so that the neighbours would not hear her screaming in pain! Kanta's mother-in-law did not protect her; rather, sometimes she too would join her son in abusing Kanta. Many a-times Kanta was not even given food to eat and had to stay hungry for days.



Given the circumstances, Kanta was afraid for her life. She sent word to her parents that she was being physically abused by her in-laws and that she wanted her parents to take her home. Kanta's father and maternal uncle visited her. Assessing the situation and realizing the gravity of affairs, they at once decided to lodge a complaint with the police. The Police registered a case under Section 498 A – for dowry atrocities and physical abuse. A woman constable and a male constable went and arrested Kanta's husband and her in-laws. After just a few days, they succeeded in getting out on bail.

Much later, Kanta Devi came to know that her husband and in-laws had been released in the case filed by her under Section 498-A, because her lawyer had tricked her into signing papers stating that she was withdrawing the case! Her lawyer had accepted a bribe from her in-laws, and weakened her case so that there was no scope for further action or hearing. When Kanta Devi learned that the case under section 498-A was closed, she filed a case for Maintenance in 2001. The case was heard in 2003 and an amount of Rupees 250/- was fixed as Maintenance to be paid every month. Her husband paid the sum for the initial 4-5 months and then stopped paying.

She again went to court about non-payment of Maintenance. Her in-laws argued that Kanta Devi was earning her livelihood, as she was running a beauty parlour, and therefore, Maintenance should not / need not be paid. Though the case was decided in Kanta's favour, with the amount of maintenance raised to Rupees 1,000/ month, no amount has been paid to her till date. Her husband does not appear in the court. Court Summons' for her husband are returned by Kanta's in-laws. They claim that he does not live with them any longer and that they do not know his whereabouts. At Kanta's insistence, summons' were served to her parents-in-law but they informed the court that they had disowned their son! Kanta's case is still pending in the court. Dates for the next hearings are fixed every time, but the police are unable to reach her husband and serve "the summons" to him. Then, she herself found out about his whereabouts and informed the court. A Summons was served to him, but he did not turn up at the court. Once a summons was served to him in Kanta's presence; he came to the court premises on the date of the next hearing but slipped away before the hearing could begin.

In the hope of getting Maintenance that is due, Kanta is spending money to attend each hearing. But each time, her investment of time and money gets wasted as her husband does not turn up. She has been fighting the case for close to eight years now. She supports herself by running a beauty parlour. The beauty parlour also doubles up as her home. Along with running the beauty parlour, she is also taking a course in nursing.

She got information about the Association of Strong Women Alone (Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan), Himachal Pradesh from a woman who approached her at the beauty parlour. She was happy to become a member to fight for her rights and also for the rights of others in similar situations. She shared her entire case with the Association, and also gave the details to them in writing. The Association is helping Kanta Devi with her case. In consultation with Kanta Devi, they have publicized her case through TV and newspapers. Membership in the Association of Strong Women Alone has also given her an alternative family to share her joys and sorrows with.

Recently, she learnt that her husband had married another girl in a temple. The Association is gathering all the information about this development to prepare grounds for filing a case of Bigamy against him!

Fighting Life's Lonely Battle

Chano Devi

Village : Pachbaniya

Post : Tardeha

District : Madhubani, Bihar

Chano Devi lost her husband due to the superstitious beliefs of an Ojha (an exorcist or a person who performs religious acts that have a close association with black magic). This tragic event happened years ago. Her husband and their small children were returning from a neighbouring village after attending a function at a relative's place. On the way back, they had to cross a river that flowed through the village and would flood with even a little rain. At that time, the river was over-flowing and a child had drowned. The villagers had collected there with the Ojha who was claiming that the child was still alive but that the Goddess was holding him on the bottom of the river!



Seeing the crowd, Chano's husband stopped on his way back. People believed what the Ojha was saying. He kept saying that the child was alive and that if someone were to dive into the river to bring the child back, then only would the child emerge alive. Hearing this, Chano's husband too said that someone must quickly go and bring the child back. After this, the Ojha and his supporters forcefully threw Chano's husband into the river. Chano's husband did not know how to swim; in fact he was quite afraid of deep water. He was struggling, trying to work against the current but the flow of the water was such that he could not. A few of the people gathered there were angry at the Ojha and tried to save Chano's husband, but their efforts were in vain. He drowned. The Ojha and others who had thrown him into the river ran away from the spot. No one from the village came for the cremation of Chano's husband and she had to manage everything on her own with the help from a few close relatives.

After this incident Chano was left alone in the world to fend for herself and her small children. None of the villagers supported her and thus she could not muster the courage to register a complaint against the Ojha. Being alone, with small children, were circumstances that compelled her to think about the consequences of complaining against the Ojha. She was afraid that the entire village would turn against her, and as she had to continue staying in the village, she decided not to report the matter.

Chano worked as a manual daily-wage labourer and concentrated on bringing up her children. Being a single woman with all her energies devoted to the struggle for survival, she was largely ignored by everyone in the village. Even the Panchayat (Village Council) never bothered about her. She never had a ration card nor was she listed on the voter's list. Though Chano's poverty needs no proof, she never appeared in the Below Poverty Line (BPL) list, nor was a grant for a house (Indira Awas) allotted to her. For the administration, it was as if Chano did not exist! Despite such negligence, Chano, with her hard work and determination, has brought up her children and managed to survive. Today both her sons have grown up and now earn a living for themselves and their mother.

When Chano heard of the Single Women's Struggle Society (Ekal Nari Sangharsh Samiti), Bihar she participated in a Block Level meeting. She was asked to represent her Block at the State Level Convention of single women organized in Patna. She went there along with three other single women from her Block. Chano says that the State Level Convention was an eye-opener for her. The experience gave her the strength to break orthodox customs prevailing in the society. She decided to wear colourful bangles and apply bindi³, simple pleasures that had been forbidden to her for years. When she returned to her village with bangles and bindi, some people started bad-mouthing her and said that she had gone and

³“Bindi” – a small dot worn as a cosmetic adornment in the middle of the forehead – but not usually worn by widows who are supposed to be “plain” and “unattractive”

remarried in Patna – another cultural taboo, since widows are generally not supposed to remarry!

When Chano refused to bow down in the face of such jeering, the villagers socially ostracized her. Chano Devi is still facing the boycott from the society, but she refuses to get intimidated or live according to the dictates of a society that offered her no support when she was in need. She is now determined to live her life on her own terms. One solace is that her children understand and support her. Chano has committed herself to forming the struggle organization of single women. Other single women have also started to understand the meaning of Chano's resistance and are gearing up to fight against social injustice and government apathy.



When She Refused to Give In, They Declared Her a Witch

Shanichari Devi

Village: Kothogada

District: Bokaro, Jharkhand



Shanichari was a poor woman who survived on a small piece of agricultural land. Her children, a daughter and a son, did not live with her. The daughter was married and lives with her husband while her son lives in another village with some relatives. Her husband had migrated to Ranchi for work. He worked as a daily wage labourer there. She was living alone, separated from her husband.

As Shanichari's family was very poor, she was allotted money for the construction of a house under the government Housing Grant scheme, the Indira Awas Yojana. After the construction of the house was completed, she gave a feast of goat meat and rice to those who had done the construction work, as was customary. After the feast was over, one man called Bheem Ganju who was from the same community as Shanichari Devi, came to her house with one Nevai Thakur and started demanding that as she had not arranged liquor for the feast, she should give them money for it. It was very late, and on hearing this Shanichari Devi got annoyed and straightaway refused to give money.

After arguing for awhile, both men went away, but now, every night, they would come and bother her. They wanted her to have a physical relationship with them, and for this they started giving her all sorts of gifts to lure her to them. They would bring sweets or fish to her house and ask her to serve them. Realizing their intentions, Shanichari Devi strictly told them to stay away from her.

Realizing that Shanichari would not give in to their demands, both Bheem Ganju and Nevai Thakur started provoking her neighbors. They would spread rumors to malign her character. Though worried because of this, Shanichari Devi stood her ground. Bheem and Nevai went a step further and started abusing her in public.

In the meanwhile Bheem's son fell ill and died due to the absence of proper medical attention. Bheem started blaming Shanichari Devi for the death of his son! He told everyone, "This witch has eaten up my son." Then he entered Shanichari's front yard and started shouting abuses at her. When Shanichari came out he caught hold of her hair and dragged her outside onto the street. He also called his wife and sister-in-law and they all started beating Shanichari. Bheem Ganju did not stop just with beating Shanichari Devi, he asked his family members to force human excreta down her throat. Nevai Thakur was also involved in all this. A large crowd had gathered by this time but they were all mute spectators.

Shanichari Devi was alone and had to tolerate this humiliation and abuse in front of the entire village. Later, she approached the Panchayat (Village Council) but could not get justice. She filed a complaint against the perpetrators in the Kasmar police station. When Bheem Ganju and Nevai Thakur learnt that a police case had been filed, they rushed to Shanichari Devi's husband in Ranchi. They bought liquor for him and when he was in a state of inebriation, they goaded him against his wife. They told him that while he works so hard to send money home, his wife spends all his money on the several men that she has sexual relations with. Shanichari's husband, Buddhu Ganju, believed these men and became quite agitated. He returned to his village and attacked Shanichari with a sharp edged weapon. Shanichari Devi was hoping that her husband would support her and stand by against those who had called her a witch. She was shocked by his behaviour and somehow managed to escape alive. With the help of a nephew, she left the village and came to Khercharatar.

It was in Khercharatar, in 2005 that she came in contact with the Association of Empowered Single Women (Ekal Nari Sashakti Sangathan), Jharkhand. She requested the Association members for their help in her case against Bheem and Nevai, as after her husband's behaviour, she had lost all hope of getting justice. Her husband had threatened that he would kill Shanichari if she was seen anywhere near the village. Other than the threat from her husband, the fact that the perpetrators had been let out of jail on bail was also causing her anxiety. She had stopped appearing for the court hearings. But with the Association's help and support she once again gained the strength to fight. With financial help from a member, she rented a room in

Kherchar and started earning a living by engaging in daily wage labour. She would also go to the court and the Association kept close track of the case. Witnesses to the incident had come forward. Their testimonies had been recorded and the sentence which would be given in a few months time was awaited. It appeared that Shanichari would be successful in getting justice.

But in the meanwhile, Shanichari's husband, who had sided with Bheem and Nevai, met Shanichari and told her that if she withdrew her complaint, the perpetrators would give her 15,000 Rupees and that her husband would take her home where they could once again live as husband and wife. Shanichari withdrew the case and did not tell the Association members about this. Once, when an Association worker went to meet Shanichari at her rented accommodation, she was surprised to find Buddhu there. Shanichari was happy and she laughingly told the worker, "Didi, he has come to take me home. Now he has realized how difficult life can be without a wife."

The worker was doubtful about Buddhu's intentions, but when she tried to alert Shanichari, her husband said that all he wanted now was to live in peace with his wife. Shanichari appeared to be pleased and hopeful about the future. Before leaving, the worker told Shanichari to think very carefully before taking any decision. At this meeting also, Shanichari did not mention that she had withdrawn the legal complaint.

Trusting her husband, Shanichari went back with him to their village Kothogada. Soon after this, on 5 April 2009, Buddhu fought with Shanichari and took away all her money from her. He also beat her up. Two days later on 7 April 2009, Shanichari came to the Association office in Kerachatar. She told the workers present there, what had happened to her. It was then that she told them that she had made a great mistake by withdrawing her complaint. The workers listened to her, and told her that they should all sit together to plan the future course of action. In the evening, Shanichari went back home. That same night Buddhu returned home with meat and liquor. He asked Shanichari to cook the meat. He made her eat the meat and drink liquor and then cut her up with an axe, ending her life then and there!

When Block Level Association members from the neighbouring villages of Sukhi and Dabadih heard of this, they immediately reported the matter to the police. Now Buddhu Ganju is in police custody and the Association is demanding that the life sentence be awarded to him for the cold blooded murder of his wife.

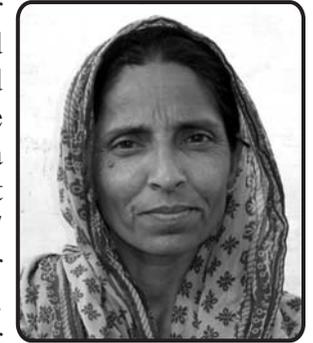
The Sangathan is Her Strength

Shama Bano

Nayapura City Area

District: Kota, Rajasthan

Shama Bano, her husband and their children - three daughters and a son stayed with her husband's joint family. Her husband supported the family through the income he brought in from a small teashop and a machine for extracting sugarcane juice that he operated. After his untimely death in 2007 the attitude of Shama's in-laws towards her and the children underwent a drastic change. Shama already shattered by the death of her husband also had to cope with the cruel treatment being met out to her by her in-laws.



Her in-laws: mother-in-law, sister-in-law and eight brothers-in-law started exploiting and misbehaving with her and the children. This included physical & mental atrocities and economic exploitation including tormenting the children.

All this started with the customary Muslim observance of Iddat. The custom requires a newly widowed woman to spend four months and ten days in isolation. During this time she is not supposed to come in contact with men, wear ornaments, bright clothes or to leave her dead husband's home. The period finally ends with a customary visit from the male members of the widow's natal family. Shama tried to stand up against this custom but her pleas fell on deaf ears. She was told that the custom is mandatory for all widows of her community and that she too would have to submit to it.

Her in-laws carried this custom too far! She was locked in a small dark room along with her children. The room did not even have electricity. Meals were served to her late and sometimes not at all; often her children had to sleep hungry. She was not given even soap to

bathe with nor oil to put in her hair. After tolerating such inhuman treatment for three months, she decided to break free from this oppression. She called her brother and requested him to take her to her natal home. She spent some time with her family but then decided to return to her marital home. Two of her daughters were of marriageable age and she did not wish to be a burden on her parents.

When she returned to her marital home, her in-laws refused to let her enter. They used the fact that she had not completed the iddat period as a point against her, abusing her and telling her not to darken their doorstep ever again! Shama had lived in the house since she had come there as a newly-wed, her children were born there, and for all her married life, that had been her only home. She did not give in to the harassment by her in-laws. The home that she had shared with her husband was hers and her children's and therefore even in the face of resistance from her in-laws, she continued to stay in her home. Shama felt that it was now her responsibility to provide for her children and that she could not be a burden on anyone. Shama asked her brother-in-law for her husband's tea stall and juice machine, so that she could start to earn a living, but the brother-in-law refused to return these.

Shama had become a member of the Association of Strong Women Alone (Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan), Rajasthan, and shared her problem with the Association. The Association members approached the local police station and with the interference of the police, she could get the juice machine back, the tea stall however remained with her brother-in-law. The Police Station Incharge also warned her in-laws against threatening or harming Shama.

After this her in-laws did not say anything to Shama directly but they devised new ways of troubling her so that she would leave the house on her own. The electricity connection to her room was cut. Her children could not study in the night and the family did not even have the protection of a fan against the sweltering heat. She sold her husband's juice machine for 3000 Rupees and got an electricity connection. In order to sustain herself and her children, she started working as a domestic maid, taking up mainly sweeping and cleaning

work. Her in-laws continued to make trouble for her. They “bad-mouthed” her in the neighbourhood and in the places in which she worked. One of her brothers-in-law went to the school where her youngest daughter was studying and told the authorities there that Shama was characterless and that if her daughter continued to study in the school, they would have to withdraw their children. As a result, Shama's daughter was disturbed by this humiliation; the teachers also started harassing her. As a result she could not concentrate on her studies and failed to clear the 8th standard. She dropped out of school and started helping her mother in her work as a domestic maid. With great difficulty, and after taking a loan, Shama managed to marry two of her daughters. Her in-laws did not help her at all.

Along with her work as a maid, Shama also started selling eggs from a hand cart in the Nayapura area of Kota City. Her brothers-in-law with the support of the police, started harassing her, and got her hand cart removed. Even then Shama did not give up; she moved her hand cart to the MBS hospital in Kota and continued to sell eggs. But the police continued to trouble Shama. Once, they overthrew her cart damaging all the eggs. Shama had been working hard to make ends meet and this loss caused by police harassment was a major setback. She shared this new ordeal with the Association of Strong Women Alone. The members once again went to the police station, and discussed the matter there. The Police Station Incharge stated that Shama had a complaining nature and all her problems were because of a family dispute that had nothing to do with them. The Strong Women Alone members pressed for Shama's right to operate the hand cart as it was her livelihood and in the face of insistence from Association members, the police gave her permission to do so.

Only a few days had passed since the meeting with the police when her brothers-in-law and the police again damaged the cart! The Association members headed to the police station once again and asked why Shama was being troubled now that she had been given permission. The Police Station Incharge assured them that now Shama would not be bothered, and he also said that instead of placing her hand cart right on the road, she should place it some distance away.

Now Shama Bano operates her hand cart without any difficulty. She says, “It is because of the Association of Strong Women Alone that I am again experiencing strength and freshness in my life.” She further adds, “When I joined the Association, I saw many of my sisters worried and sad, but I have also seen them become strong with the Association's support.” She acknowledges that the members of the Association have always supported her in difficult times, and it is through this experience that she too has gained the strength to stand and support other women in their troubles too.

In 2009, Shama and other women went to apply for the Widow Pension that was due to them, but the local Revenue Department clerk (Patwari) – who had to verify that they were eligible for a pension -- turned them away. He said that at that time, since the central government elections had been called, the code of conduct for elections had been declared and he could not give them the necessary certificates to enable them to get the payments of pensions. Shama immediately sensed that the excuse was not valid and informed other members of the Association of Strong Women Alone. The Association reported the matter to the press, and one newspaper published the story. Very soon, the women had their certificates from the same Revenue Clerk, and due payments to all the women were then made.

Today Shama accompanies other single women to government offices. At some of the offices, the staff recognize her as an aware and empowered woman. Her association with the Strong Women Alone has changed her outlook towards her problems, and she feels stronger than before. She proudly says, “Today, on my own, I take decisions that concern me and I have no more fears while fighting for my rights”.



Living on the Brink

Rampati

Village: Devapur

Block: Lalganj

District: Pratapgarh, Uttar Pradesh

A blind and ill mother-in-law, young daughters, a growing son, no source of income.... the list of woes goes on. It is not easy to even imagine how Rampati manages to survive!



It has been seven years since Rampati's husband died. Rampati and her family are struggling to survive. Till her husband was alive, they would farm 5 biswas of agricultural land. It was not a lot but it helped ward off hunger. But as soon as her husband died, her brother-in-law illegally occupied this small piece of land.

Rampati did not want to give up her right to the land, and so she filed a case in the civil court. But she does not have the money to pay to the lawyer. Rampati works as an agricultural labourer on somebody else's land. The work is seasonal, it is not regular, and she doesn't even get minimum wage on the days she does work. The back breaking work required of her includes transplanting, weeding, watering and harvesting the rice crop. But the income that she gets from this is not enough to arrange even one square meal a day for the family.

Rampati is the sole support for her family of five. If because of sickness, she can't go to work then the family has nothing to cook that day. Sometimes the villagers take pity and feed the children, on other days the family subsists on just a handful of puffed rice.

Rampati gets widow pension. The 300 Rupees that she gets are not even enough for her blind mother-in-law's medicines. She is on the BPL list and has a ration card. But knowing that she is in a weak

position, the PDS shop owner also cheats her. When she objects, he threatens to take away her BPL card (legally, he has no right to do this).

Rampati's son is only 10 years old. Of her three daughters, one is married while the other two are 15 and 17-years-old. It was with great difficulty that Rampati managed to marry off her oldest daughter. The villagers extended some help, and she also had to borrow some money. Even as she struggles for the family's day to day existence, she is also worried about how she will manage to get her other two daughters married. She hopes that once her son grows up, she will get some respite, but that day is still too far into the future.

At the age of 35, Rampati feels she is old and sick. A life of ceaseless toil and very little return has taken years away from her. She came in contact with the Association of Strong Women Alone (Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan), Uttar Pradesh when it began working in the Pratapgarh District. The Association there is in the formation stage. Meetings have been held with women in Rampati's village- Devapur. Being aware of Rampati's predicament, the Association members try to help. It makes sure that Rampati receives her pension on time. Contact with other Association members has helped bring Rampati out of hopelessness; she now feels that she has friends who encourage and help her. The Association hopes to strengthen Rampati so that she can leave behind helplessness and destitution, and gain the strength to fight against the debilitating conditions that affect her life.



When Brothers Turn Enemy

Ruksana Sheikh

Mumbai,
Maharashtra

Ruksana is a 40-year-old Muslim spinster. When she was young, her parents arranged her marriage but the groom's side refused to go through with the marriage as Ruksana's parents were unable to pay the dowry they demanded.

Ruksana lived with her parents and five brothers in a slum of Mumbai. She could not continue her studies beyond the elementary standard (Class 5). Ruksana's brothers would place restrictions on her, telling her not to go out or talk to other people, and a hundred other “do's and don't's” that took away Ruksana's freedom. Due to this, there would often be quarrels in their home. Her father tried to persuade her brothers not to put such unnecessary restrictions on their sister, but her brothers would not agree. As the older brothers got married, they, one by one, moved out of the household to live separately with their wives. They did not take responsibility for their parents.

Realizing that the sons would not care for their mother or their sister, Ruksana's father willed the family house to Ruksana. After his death, there was no earning member left in the family. Responsibility for the house, mother and the two youngest brothers fell on Ruksana's shoulders. So she let out a portion of the house on rent to make both ends meet. Her brothers who had moved out of the house wanted to deprive Ruksana of her inheritance. They argued, “Why does she need the house, she is not even married!”

To make Ruksana's life more miserable, they all moved back into the house. They would call her names and would all get together and beat Ruksana. Ruksana would fight back, but they were too many for her. One day, they brought some members of the “male elders community council” (jamat) who told Ruksana to give up her right to the house in favour of her brothers. But Ruksana stood firm and did not budge under pressure.

The neighbours and people in the community would pass

remarks about Ruksana's character. They all supported her brothers. The brothers could take possession of the house only by driving her out, and they were trying to drive her out, by abusing and harassing her. They were least concerned about their sick mother who would become very disturbed by all this, further affecting her health. Ruksana bore all the expenses of the two surgeries that her mother had to undergo. None of the brothers came to help during their mother's illness.

In those days of struggle and anxiety, Ruksana happened to meet Akhtari who was associated with the Saheli Group – a group of Muslim Single Women. Ruksana's contact with the Saheli Group helped her a lot. Other members of the group would boost her morale and encourage her to stand for her rights. Akhtari advised- “Ruksana, don't let go of your rights under any circumstances.” Due to the support of the Saheli Group, Ruksana could maintain her self-confidence and inner strength. She not only dealt with the problems in her own life, she also organized the single women of her neighbourhood to form a group to support and strengthen each other.

Some builders were interested in buying the tenement in which Ruksana's house was situated. They offered to pay high prices to buy all the houses in the tenement. When Ruksana's brothers came to know about this, they started pressurizing her to sell the house. Their abuse of their sister escalated. They assaulted her and in one fight, beat her so badly that she lost several of her teeth! Ruksana went to the Police Station and filed an FIR⁴. She was given a medical check up in a government hospital. The Saheli Group stood by her side and helped her with legal advice.

With the Group's help, she met a lawyer and reached an agreement with the builders to sell her house. The Group helped her to open a bank account. From the proceeds of the sale of the house, she bought a house for her mother and herself. She also gave some money to each of her brothers and deposited the rest in the bank for future need. Ruksana feels that other than her mother, the Saheli Group is her true family and without their support, she could not have managed everything so well.

⁴FIR – First Information Report, the first report in filing a case against another, in the Police Station.

A Life Sacrificed on the Altar of Tradition

Mannkunwar

Gulab Ji Ka Guda

Block: Bhalundi

District : Chittorgarh, Rajasthan

Mannkunwar was age 7 when she was married! At 10, she was already a widow. She neither understood what marriage was nor what being widowed meant. But these two events would set her apart from other people around her and decide how she would live for the rest of her life. This too, she only understood much later. When the news of her husband's death reached her family they removed her bangles, bindi and all the jewelry she had been given to wear at the time of her marriage. She was given a set of black clothes, and told that this was all that she would be allowed to wear.



Mannkunwar was sent to her in-laws to mourn a husband she had never known, and had to stay there till all the death ceremonies had been completed. After that, she returned to her natal family. As Mannkunwar grew a little older, she would argue with her family members to let her live the way other young girls did. She would ask that she be allowed to wear colourful clothes and jewelry, that she not be left behind when the rest of the family went to auspicious or happy functions like marriages. Being a child, Mannkunwar was given some concessions from the hard life that widowhood entails. She could wear green coloured clothes instead of only black! As time passed, she was also permitted to wear earrings, anklets and a nose ring. She spent her childhood and adolescence moving between her natal and marital homes, constantly being warned against over-stepping that invisible line, which separated her from other girls her age.

When she reached the age of 18-19 years she would hear her friends talking of their husbands and married life. This would make

her sad. She would wonder why fate had decided that only sadness be her lot. The thought of living alone all her life would sadden her and evoke anxiety about the future. She wanted to remarry, but widow remarriage in the Rajput community was unheard of. The burden of family honour that rested on her young shoulders would keep her silent about her desires and wants till the time she decided to bury them forever.

When she was 22, her father-in-law died and she was called to her dead husband's home to look after her old mother-in-law. She had come to terms with her life situation, and had accepted that the rest of her life too would pass. She received 2 bighas of agricultural land (almost 1 acre), one well and one room from her husband's share of the property. Initially, her younger sister-in-law and brother-in-law would taunt her about bringing bad luck to their family, but she would keep quiet. After her association with the Association of Strong Women Alone (Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan), Rajasthan 55-year-old Mannkunwar now has the confidence to reply back – after 33 years of enduring in silence!

When she first came in contact with the Association, she would say about her life-

“I spent my childhood being obedient to my parents, youth was spent working either for my in-laws or for my natal family, now that I am growing old, I feel I have no one to call my own.”

But now she feels she is not alone anymore. She is involved in the Association's work and for this, she often moves out of her village and travels on her own - something she couldn't have dreamt of doing before she realized her strength as an 'Ekal Nari' (Single Woman). She is no more a depressed woman, no more an object of pity -- rather she is a strong woman helping other single women to find their own strength too.

Mannkunwar is a lively participant in the Association's meetings and conventions. She sings, dances, and is a favourite to act in role plays. She says,

“At least now in my old age, I have the opportunity to live a full life and enjoy simple pleasures that I could not earlier.”

Breaking Free from Exploitation

Baby Bai

Village: Morkheda

Block: Mandsaur

District: Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh

The “Bachada tribe” resides in the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh, mainly in the Mandsaur, Neemach and Ratlam Districts. Hamlets occupied by the tribe are located away from the rest of the villages, and there is virtually no interaction between the Bachada and the other communities. The socio-economic traditions prevalent in the community ensure that families are completely dependent on their daughters for financial support. Following the age-old traditional custom, girls, once they reach the age of 10 or 12, are forced into commercial sex work. The girl children, on whose shoulders rest the burden of the entire family, have no say in this matter and have to do as they are expected to do.



The only Bachada girls who escape being forced into sex work are the ones who are to be married. Their marriage is fixed when they are very young. Right from the time the marriage is fixed, the girl's family starts extorting money from the boy's parents as the bride price in the community is as high as Rs. 1,50,000 to Rs. 2,00,000. This high bride price is a sign of dual exploitation as it characterizes purchasing of girl by the groom's family. The family that brings in the bride after making the payment, treats her as “property”. She is always suppressed and has to face rampant domestic violence. If for any reason the girl wants to end the marriage, she has to go through a test of fire (agni pariksha) and fulfill other inhuman dictates of the caste panchayat, or caste elders. If she wants an end to the marriage without this torture, she has to pay double the bride price to her husband.

Baby Bai, a Bachada woman from Mandasaur, was forced into commercial sex work at the tender age of 10 or 11 years of age. She was the eldest of four siblings, and thus it was expected that she would shoulder the responsibility of her family. For years, Baby Bai looked after the needs of the entire family. She even paid the bride price so that both of her brothers could be married.

Baby Bai never wanted to be a sex worker but as a child, she was not given the choice. After taking care of her responsibilities towards her younger siblings and her natal family, she often dreamt of starting afresh, leaving behind her life as a sex worker. Her dream came true when a man she liked asked her to marry him. Going against her family and community, Baby got married and moved to Mumbai. Four children were born to her - three daughters and a son. Baby Bai was happy with her husband, but this respite from a life of struggle came to an end when her husband died.

Baby Bai had no option but to move back to her village Morkheda in Madhya Pradesh. Her family expected her to go back to sex work, but she refused and decided to live alone with her children. She had resolved that her daughters would not face what she had. She arranged for the marriages of her son and her eldest daughter, and got them settled in life. She is working hard to educate the younger children. One of her younger daughters is studying to be a nurse while the other is in Class X and stays in a hostel run by the Tribal Welfare Department. Baby Bai's daughters were the first ever Bachada girls in the area to seek higher education. Baby Bai had to face opposition from the community and was also ridiculed by outsiders. Even getting her daughters admitted to school was difficult. But Baby Bai's efforts mean a better life not only for her children but for other children of her community too.

For the past 8 years, Baby Bai has been working with the 'Bhor Abhiyan', an NGO, which works with the Bachada community. Due to her efforts, most children of the village are studying in school today. Baby Bai continues to work for the rights of women who face oppressive circumstances as she once did.



“How will I manage to survive the coming day?”

Rajvanta Devi

Village: Harikisun Dubey

Block: Lalganj

District: Pratapgarh, Uttar Pradesh

Fifty five-year-old Rajvanta Devi lost her husband two years back. Her son has been living separately since his marriage. Her son, like her, is very poor; he has trouble keeping his wife and children fed and therefore cannot support Rajvanta. His only source of income is the work that he gets under NREGA⁵, a government programme ensuring 100 days of livelihood for the rural poor, which is yet to reach a desired level of performance in her village. Rajvanta was earning her living by making plates out of dried leaves⁶, working like most other people in the village. The village that Rajvanta lives in is located in the periphery of a forest.



One year back while when Rajvanta was going out to relieve herself, she was hit by a motor cycle. She was hit quite hard -- she fell on the ground and lost consciousness. People who saw the accident caught hold of the careless motorbike riders, but as the riders belonged to a dominant and influential group in the village, they were allowed to leave without even taking Rajvanta to a dispensary to see to her First Aid treatment! Rajvanta did not get any support for her treatment. When she approached the people responsible for the accident, they not only refused, they also made her sign a paper and she does not know what it contained.

⁵NREGA – National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

⁶Leaf plates and little leaf bowls are used to eat from in large marriages and meetings, and can be just thrown away after use.

In order to get treatment, she had to take a loan. The person who lent her the money charges 10 percent interest – per month⁷. She is in no condition to pay it back, and the money that she borrowed was not enough for her treatment. Therefore she has not recovered completely, and has to walk on crutches.

Before Rajvanta met with the accident, she would walk to the forest to collect the leaves required for making plates. She would manage to make a living on this. After the accident, even when Rajvanta's legs were somewhat functional again, she could no longer walk to the forest, as she has to use crutches. The accident has left her helpless. Now, she has to rely on others to sell her the leaves with which she makes plates. Even if she works all day long, she cannot earn more than 12 Rupees. She does not know whether she should live on this money or use it to repay the loan, as doing both is just not possible.

Rajvanta gets a Widow Pension through the government pension scheme, but this gets credited in her account only after six to eight months. She also has the red ration card meant for extremely poor people but she never has enough money to buy the subsidized ration from the PDS⁸ ration shop. The money lender keeps asking her to return the money she has borrowed. She can't even manage to pay the interest -- forget the actual sum she borrowed. Many times the money lender also insults her, but she doesn't know what to do. She has no clue how to go on living in these circumstances. She can't sleep at night as her mind is constantly occupied with the question, “How will I manage to survive the coming day?”



⁷10% interest per month, 120% interest per year!

⁸PDS – Public Distribution System, government run ration shops for food grain, sugar, kerosene

Not Alone Anymore

Abaida Sayyad

Bandra East

Mumbai, Maharashtra

Abaida was her parents' only child. She was brought up with love and affection. She had studied till Class 7 and her family was comfortably well off. Abaida's mother, during this time, was working in Saudi Arabia and would send money back home. When Abaida was 22-years-old, her parents married her to a man she liked. He was her aunt's brother. Her parents spent a lot of money on her marriage and gave her all that was required to start a new household.

Even after Abaida was married, her mother paid for all the family's expenses. Abaida's husband did not do any work. He had become used to the easy money that they were receiving from Abaida's family, and never made an attempt to support his family.

After some time, Abaida had her first son. Everything was peaceful so far. Abaida's mother had given a lot of things out of love for her daughter and grandson. Abaida's husband continued to be idle and loitered around spending money heedlessly. Abaida's father died and her mother, who had grown old, returned from Saudi Arabia. In the meanwhile, a second son was born to Abaida. Abaida's mother started staying with her. Even at this time, the family was living on her mother's savings which were slowly coming to an end. Their financial situation was worsening day by day. Abaida's mother was no longer in a position to earn, and her husband was least worried and continued in his old ways. He neither worked outside the home nor shared any responsibility for house work.

One fine day after all the money had finished, and even the daily provisions at home were almost used up, he pronounced 'Talaq' – 'I divorce you'. He just said the word thrice- 'talaq, talaq, talaq' and divorced his wife! On being asked why he was doing this, he said, “Abaida is too short for my taste, therefore I don't like her.” Abaida had not appeared short to him when he chose to get married to her or

in all the years that he was with her. He had had his eyes on the easy money that would be available to him, but as soon as the money dwindled, Abaida overnight became “too short”! He had never bothered about his children and he did not even think about them when he divorced Abaida.

The Quran does not recognize such triple talaq, but despite this, the community accepted it. Soon after he left Abaida, he married another woman from the same locality and started living with her. Abaida had led a sheltered life, and this turn of events completely shattered her. She was now responsible for her ailing mother and two small children. She started working as a domestic servant. Trying to meet her family's needs was in itself a challenge, but her lot was made tougher by the society that questioned her every move now that she was single.

It was then that Abaida met a woman named Akhtari who was a member of the Women's Group (Mahila Mandal). She introduced Abaida to this Women's Group. She also introduced Abaida to the Saheli Group⁹ – a group of Muslim single women. Abaida learned that there were many women like her – who had been deserted by their husbands for no reason. She realized that she was not alone. Abaida was happy to join the group. She gained courage and strength. The Saheli Group also helped her to train as an 'Ayah' or 'care giver'. After the training, Abaida started getting paid well and her work involved caring for the ill and the elderly.

All the support that she had was from the Saheli Group. The community continued to make life difficult for her. People maligned her character just because she was alone, and sometimes had to return late from work. Comments like –“Where have you been? Why so late? Why is your tummy growing so big?” – were hurled at her daily. She had to face such unwarranted remarks. But she was strengthened and encouraged by her association with the Saheli Group. She herself has become a source of support for other single women.

⁹ “Saheli” is a Hindi word that means “Girlfriend”

With the help of the Women's Group and the Saheli Group, she requested the Police to intervene with her husband. In the Police Station, her husband agreed to pay her Maintenance every month. He paid for some time and then stopped. Abaida's struggle for her rights is still on.

The pain and anguish that she has had to cope with cannot be measured nor can it be compensated. But the Saheli Group has been a forum in which to share her pain and sorrow. She wishes that no one should go through what she has undergone.

Abaida's believes,

*“Don't just tolerate,
stand up and fight.*

*Change the mindset of the society,
then only will women get dignity, respect and justice.”*



When Lives Have No Value – Naxal Violence and Police Inaction

Kamla Devi

Block: Barachatti

District: Gaya, Bihar

Kamla, her husband and their three children – 2 girls and a boy lived in the village Bongiya Tola. Kamla's husband, Sukhdev was a farmer and the sole bread winner for this family of five. Life for them was not free of struggle but the couple worked hard so that the children could have a good future. Thirteen years ago one single act of violence shook up this family and they have not recovered since.



On 30 April 2009 Sukhdev was travelling from Boringa to Barrachatti. His wife and small children awaited his return, what they did not know was that Sukhdev would never return home. At around five in the evening 50 – 60 Naxalites surrounded Sukhdev when he was on his way back and murdered him. When the news reached Kamla and other members of Sukhdev's family, they were stunned. Sukhdev's death caused uproar in the village as everyone knew that he was a simple farmer with no links to any militant group.

Protesting Sukhdev's cruel murder, members of his family and other people from the village blocked the National Highway No. 1 and refused to cremate Sukhdev's body till some action was taken against the murderers. Commonly known as the Grand Trunk Road, the National Highway No. 1 connects the north of the country to the east and is of significant importance for trade and commerce. Because of the strategic importance of the highway the local administration responded within a few hours of the road block. The police inspector from the Barachatti police station, the block officer and other government officials arrived at the site of the road block. In front of

all the people gathered there, they promised Kamla and other members of Sukhdev's family that the guilty would be punished and that Kamla and her children would receive 1 Lakh Rupees as compensation. Reassured by this promise the villagers calmed down. Sukhdev's body was cremated after a post mortem was done.

Once the cremation was performed and the villagers had all gone back home, things quietened down. Kamla went again and again to various officials to demand that action be taken against her husband's murderers but nothing was done. The police was not interested in pursuing the case nor was any compensation ever given to Kamla.

What has been most painful for Kamla is the attitude of the administration. Instead of doing what their duty demanded, the local administration got together with some criminals and filed a false case of kidnapping against Kamla's husband. They declared Kamla's murdered husband a militant and a Naxalite. For the past 13 years Kamla has been fighting to clear her husband's name and to see justice done. She has been going from one office to the other, has written to several officers and ministers, but all to no avail.

Kamla had worked hard to rebuild her life after her husband's death. She had tried to be both mother and father to her children, to give them all the opportunities she possibly could. But her world came crashing down once again when on 29th March 2009. She again became a hapless victim of mindless violence. At night, between 9 pm to 1 am around 200 Naxalites surrounded her house. They broke in took away all Kamla's possessions and before they left they blasted the house. Kamla's and her children's lives were spared but they were left with nothing on which to survive. She reported the matter to the police but no action has been taken. Kamla has no faith in the police and the administration; she fears further violence from the Naxalites and feels that the police will do nothing if she and her children are massacred. Inaction by the police in ensuring her safety has caused her to leave her village Bongiya Tola. Today, 52-year-old Kamla has been uprooted from her home of several decades and is forced to put together some semblance of an existence for herself and her children, while the administration continues to turn a blind eye to all the crimes committed against her.

I Want My House Back: To Make It My Home Once Again!

Maniben Karshan

Village: Thaneshvar

Block: Rapar

District: Kutch, Gujarat



A financially disadvantaged widow is oppressed not only by the society but also by the much valued social institution - Family. While her husband was alive, 37 year-old Maniben had no complaints from life.

But since the demise of her husband, even survival has become difficult for Maniben and her three children. She has had to exert all her physical and emotional strength to move mountains of problems created by greedy in-laws and an apathetic governance system. She has had to leave the town in which she was living, and move to a village. Her children have had to drop out of school, and she is forced to make both ends meet for her family of four on the petty amount that she receives as widow pension.

Maniben and her husband owned a house that was turned into rubble in the January 2001 earthquake that shattered the Kutch region of Gujarat. They received some compensation for repair and reconstruction from the government, with the help of which they laboured to rebuild the house. After Maniben's husband died, her brothers-in-law took possession of the house and did not allow Maniben or her children to even enter the house that had been their family home for many years. Maniben mustered her courage to file a legal case about the matter in the “fast track court” at Rapar. Although the case is in a “fast track court”, even so, it is still going on, and it

may take years until justice is done. In the meanwhile, Maniben has trouble sustaining herself and her children.

Maniben has not given up in the face of all these difficulties. She took up a job in a local girls' school that fetched her 500 Rupees a month. As a single woman, she is a soft target for her brothers-in-law, who continue to create problems for her. They provoked the school authorities against Maniben and this cost her her job. They also presented some false information to the Social Welfare Department's local office, on the basis of which her widow pension was stopped! With all her sources of income cut off, Maniben was in a dire state. With the support of The Forum of Strong Single Women (Ekal Nari Shakti Manch), Gujarat, she was able to get her widow pension restarted, and also received the pension money that was due to her over twelve months, but had been unjustly denied.

However, Maniben has had to move to her village where she is working in the houses of affluent people and gets paid 15 Rupees a day for removing and dumping cow dung. She has applied for work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and is hopeful that she will get 100 days employment once the mandatory job card is prepared and delivered to her.

The legal battle for possession of her house is on. The brothers-in-law are not willing to let Maniben and her children get their share of the house. Maniben is determined, even in the face of harassment, that she will not give up her property rights, and that she will fight to the very end so that she and her children may finally get a secure roof over their heads.



In a Country of a Billion, a Single Woman is Often All Alone

Saraben Lagha Hussain Kumhar

Village: Bermeti

Block: Avdasha

District: Kutch – Bhuj, Gujarat

Saraben and her 11-year-old daughter Shafina are homeless. They live in a small makeshift shelter they have made with wood collected from the nearby forest. Their hut doesn't offer much protection from the forces, but it is all that they have to call their own. In stark contrast to this, Saraben's in-laws control a sizable amount of land and live in well-built houses. Saraben and her daughter could have lived a similar life had selfishness and inhuman greed not overtaken their relatives.

Saraben was leading a life of contentment with her husband and three daughters. She had dreams for her daughters' future. But since the death of her husband nightmares have taken the place of her simple dreams. Soon after her husband's death, her brothers-in-law took control over all his property leaving Saraben and her children in a state of destitution. They refused to help Saraben in any way. It has been eleven years since Saraben's husband died of Tuberculosis, and life has become a daily struggle.

Her financial condition is a known fact in the village, but even then, she has not been enrolled in the Below Poverty Line (BPL) list. She does not have a ration card and also does not get widow pension. Her attempts at availing government schemes have meant additional expenditure and failure. When she first came to know about the Widow Pension Scheme she enquired about it from the postman. She was told that applying for it was a long process and would require several documents. She arranged all the documents that she could. Even the cost to do this was too much for Saraben. It has been two years since she applied, but she is yet to receive any pension, although

other women in the village do. She has no idea what is the status of her application. Her youngest daughter Shafina is 11 years-old. She has had to drop out of school. Saraben tried to arrange a scholarship for her daughter, but that, like the widow pension, proved to be a mirage. She has now realized that availing any government welfare scheme is not something that a poor illiterate widow can do. The absence of appropriate documents and her inability to get these made in a corrupt, anti-poor welfare system, means that “on paper”, she is not counted amongst the poor – although she is destitute!

It is difficult to even imagine her life full of miseries, where every requirement is dependent on mercy bestowed by others; but for Saraben and her daughters, this is the only way of life left. With great difficulty, Saraben has managed to get two of her daughters married. At the time of their marriages, she had no money; she could not sleep for nights worrying how would she manage the marriage expenses. She could not see any way out of her humiliating circumstances other than death. At the last moment, the villagers came to her help, and her daughters could be married. Her in-laws did not offer any support.

Saraben does not like to live on other people's charity. She has been so stressed and dejected that she wanted to end her life, but her youngest daughter, Shafina, said that they both could go and look for labour work in other villages as well. Saraben realized that if she dies then what will happen to her youngest daughter. She doesn't want to leave her alone at the mercy of a cruel world. So she and her daughter continue to struggle.

Saraben says, “It is owing to such continued suffering that single women die. No one is bothered about their plight – family, society and government – all turn deaf ears to them. How could anyone live in such an oppressing scenario? The only remedy available is to die.”



Eternal Courage

Kamal Pathik

District: Jhalawar,
Rajasthan



Kamal Pathik was one of the initial members of the Association of Strong Women Alone (Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan), Rajasthan. Since joining the Association in 1999 she hasn't once looked back at the past. Once oppressed and exploited, today Kamal Pathik has become a pillar of strength and a motivation to other single women who have suffered like her.

Kamal's misery began when she was but a child. Kamal had to bear the brunt of being a girl child. Her mother was never affectionate and her father often away from home. Kamal was not allowed to continue her studies after class five. Her mother said that being a girl, all she needed to know was to read and write her own letters. Of what use would more education be? She wasn't allowed any freedom. If she dressed well or laughed too freely, her mother would taunt, "If you want attention so badly, go find yourself a man." She would tell Kamal, "If you ever displease me, I will marry you to such a horrible man that your life will forever be spoilt." Her elder brother's attitude was no better. He saw Kamal as an outsider and resented her presence in 'his' home. Kamal grew up without the love and care that is every child's due.

When she was still a teenager, her mother married her off to a man who was a known loafer and idler. He even had a criminal record. Her father was against the match, but in his absence, her mother got Kamal engaged. Even at the time of marriage Kamal's mother did not fail to show that she detested her daughter. Near the marriage date, she went away from home refusing to shoulder the responsibilities and only after much pleading agreed to come back so that the family

would not lose face in front of the society. Saddened by her mother's attitude, Kamal had decided that she would never again come back to her parent's home. Kamal's time with her natal family had been so painful that she couldn't help but hope that things would change for her once she was married.

Things did change but much to Kamal's horror they changed for the worse! The entire day, Kamal would be engaged in household chores, and in the night, her drunken husband would beat her ruthlessly. He believed that Kamal was characterless that was why she had been married to a good for nothing like him. He used to shout at Kamal – "Tell me – how many lovers do you have? You are so good looking then why did your parents select a drunkard like me?" Kamal had little control or choice about the direction her life was moving. As years went by, she became the mother of three children. Her abuse at the hands of her husband and in-laws continued. There was no one Kamal could share her sorrows with. Her husband was unemployed; whatever little he earned, he spent on alcohol or gambling. Her in-laws would fight with her and would sometimes even throw her out. Her father-in-law would humiliate her on every occasion. He would tell her, "How come your children are so fair when my son is dark? Who is the father?" Depressed, Kamal tried to commit suicide during one of the darkest occasions of her life.

Under pressure from her in-laws, Kamal and her husband had to leave the house they had shared with them. Kamal started living in Kota with her husband and children. One fine morning, her husband left her all alone in Kota and vanished from her life. For some days, Kamal took help from her elder brother, but she realized that this could not continue for long. Wanting to be independent of help grudgingly given, Kamal started working as a house-maid. After some days, she learnt that her husband had started working with the company Sahara India. Neither he offered to help with the children, nor did Kamal want to renew contact with him. Things continued as before, with Kamal taking sole responsibility for herself and her children.

It was only when Kamal's husband was suffering from a serious illness, and his family had refused to take care of him, that he landed on her doorstep. Kamal took care of him, spent money for his treatment at the cost of her own comfort. But he died in 1998. The society that had refused to help Kamal when she was in need, and had ignored her very existence, came back to demand that she observe all the customs and perform all rituals required of a widow. Though Kamal hated it, she had to mourn the passing of a husband who had never once been a support to her.

In 1999, Kamal got associated with The Association of Strong Women Alone. Her life has transformed since then. She is now confident and realizes her worth. She started living the way she wanted to. She started wearing colourful sarees and make-up. People would comment and insinuate that she had illegitimate relations with men. But she would ignore all this. She concentrated on making her life better. She started stitching; her sons also helped her in this. Kamal's struggles did not end. One of her sons committed suicide; up to now, she does not know the reason for his decision. She feels that because of all the stress that she faced, she could not give enough time to her children. She says the Association was with her in her times of need, and that has helped her overcome her grief. She no more allows social customs and beliefs to weaken her. In her son's marriage, she performed all the ceremonies that parents traditionally perform, but which are a taboo for widows. She believes that when she has single handedly raised her children, why should she not share their joys! Association members are "her family" and they stood behind her when she courageously challenged, indeed broke, unequal social customs.

Kamal's experience has taught her that society pressurizes a widow to believe that she is alone, dependent, weak and helpless. Kamal is challenging this mindset. She says that she got this strength and understanding from the Association of Strong Women Alone. Now her objective in life is to inspire and encourage other single women to fight and not to give in!!



The End of a Dream

Lalita Kunwar Chandra Singh Dasundi

District: Panchmahal,

Gujarat

Lalita Kunwar a resident of Panchmahal, Gujarat, was married into a family from Sagwada Block, Dungarpur District, Rajasthan in the year 1994. The marriage was arranged by her parents and was solemnized with the due observance of all socio-religious rituals. Lalita Kunwar's parents gifted her gold jewelry along with all other gifts that are usually given by the bride's family at the time of marriage.

Six months after the marriage Lalita's in-laws started demanding dowry. All of her in-laws; father-in-law, mother-in-law, brother-in-law and two unmarried sisters-in-law pressurized Lalita to ask her parents for money, the pretext was to get a job for her husband. They would abuse her and pass taunting remarks. Her sisters-in-law would say, "Your complexion is so dark -- you don't look good with our brother. You have ruined his life by marrying him! Why don't you jump into a well? Can't you get two litres of kerosene?" Despite being subjected to such treatment by her in-laws, Lalita silently tolerated all this as she hoped that someday, her husband would realize her worth and then they would live happily ever after.

Happiness never knocked at her door, but the atrocities by her in-laws went on increasing. She was often beaten and thrown out of the house. Lalita was not allowed to keep any money in her possession, and was totally dependent on her in-laws. Whenever she was thrown out of the house, it was her mother-in-law's brother who would give her the money to go to her parent's house, as he was the one who had arranged the marriage. Lalita's married sister-in-law and her husband would provoke Lalita's husband against her. He would beat Lalita and ask her to leave his house. He too wanted to get rid of her. He would say, "You have ruined my life, why don't you die and relieve me from

the burden that you are! Remember this - you don't own anything here, you won't get even a single rupee from the property nor even food to survive.” He would even threaten to kill her.

Lalita Kunwar's brother-in-law would also threaten her. He once told her, “When my brother doesn't want to be with you then why are you here, if your parents can't keep you then tell me and I will get you some poison.” He would say, “Collect your things and go away or we will have to pour five litres of kerosene on you!”

After 14 years of holding on to the naïve belief that one day her marriage would work, Lalita finally realized that neither her husband nor his family would ever accept her. She finally went to court. She has filed a case for Maintenance against her husband. She has no livelihood nor any means of earning a living. Her father supports her financially.

Around two and a half years back, Lalita came in contact with The Forum of Strong Single Women (Ekal Nari Shakti Manch), Gujarat. There she met many separated women who had learned to fight for their rights since they had become members of the Forum. It is with the help of the Forum of Strong Single Women that Lalita is fighting her case in the court. The case for Maintenance is going on in Santrampuri Namdar Court. The court had ordered Maintenance of 550 Rupees per month. This meager sum is not acceptable to Lalita and she is continuing her fight for a Maintenance amount which will allow her to manage her life in the future. She has decided that with the Forum's support she will file another case under the Domestic Violence Act 2005 to get justice for the suffering she has had to endure over a long 14 years.



Sangathan Exposes Corruption with the Right To Information

Chamni Devi

Village: Jeruadih

Block: Vishnugadh

District: Hazaribag, Jharkhand

Chamni Devi is an old widow. She did not have a house. Life was tough as it is, but as Chamni Devi grew old, the absence of proper shelter became a major problem. She applied for a house under the “Indira Housing Programme” (Indira Awas Yojana). Her name was included in the waiting list by the Gram Sabha¹⁰ in 2006 – 2007 and by the year end, an “Indira House” was allotted to her. Under the scheme, she was to receive a total of 25,000 Rupees in four equal installments of 6,250 Rupees each. She received her first two installments through the bank.



When her third installment under the scheme was due, Chamni Devi fell ill and could not go to the Block Office. After she had recovered a little, she went to collect the third installment. It was then that she got the shock of her life. The Block Development Officer and the Village Secretary (Panchayat Sevak) told her that, “Your third installment has already been paid.”! Chamni Devi tried her best to explain to the government officials that she was very ill at the time the installment came due and therefore couldn't have collected the cheque. “I have not got any money” she pleaded. The officials did not listen to her, and turned her away with the threat, “If you don't

¹⁰“Gram Sabha” – or Village Assembly. In the Panchayati Raj local self-government structure of decision-making, the Village Assembly is the official meeting of all adult citizens in the Village Council area, and the Village Assembly decides on the beneficiaries of government schemes

continue construction work under the scheme you will be jailed.” Hearing this, Chamni Devi was quite frightened, but did not know how to get the officials to listen to her. She had to return to her village without the payment, her mind full of worries about what to do.

Chamni Devi was not able to come to terms with this unexpected turn of events -- she did not know what to do, where to go, whom to ask for help in order to overcome the problem that she now faced. It was by coincidence that she met Kabutari Devi of Dharampur village, a State Committee member of The Association of Empowered Women Alone, Jharkhand (Ekal Nari Sashakti Sangathan, Jharkhand). Kabutari Devi patiently listened to Chamni Devi and then asked her to come to the monthly Block Level Association meeting. Chamni Devi shared her problem with the Block Committee members. At the meeting Chamni Devi's case was referred to the Enquiry Committee (a group of the Block Committee Members who, when a problem case is put before the Block Committee, then go to inquire about the actual ground realities of the case). It works to ensure a fair hearing and justice for the Association members.

The Enquiry Committee visited the Block office. The Village Council Secretary (Panchayat Sevak), the Village Council Supervisor (Gram Panchayat Supervisor) and the Block Development Officer all stated that Chamni Devi's third installment had already been issued to her through a cheque. Documents related to the issuance of the cheque were shown to the Association members. They also accused Chamni Devi of lying and said that she had already taken the money, but as she had given the money to her daughter, and she was now creating a scene to escape the penalty for not continuing her house construction.

The Association members asked Chamni Devi to get a medical certificate from the doctor who treated her while she was sick so that they could prove to the officials that Chamni Devi had not been in a condition to collect her cheque. But Chamni Devi's problems were compounded when she learnt that the doctor, a private practitioner had died in an accident! Even in the face of this setback, the

Sangathan members continued to struggle for justice. They submitted an application to the government demanding an enquiry in the whole matter.

When nothing was done for two months after the application had been filed, the Sangathan demanded relevant information with regard to their application under provisions of the Right to Information Act 2005 (RTI). The information demanded included a progress report on the enquiry and a photo copy of the cheque issued to Chamni Devi.

Instead of taking action on the application, some officials roped in one Mohammad Akhtar Ansari from Chamni Devi's village. Ansari fooled Chamni Devi, Kabutari Devi and Mudari Devi into putting their thumb impressions on an application that he told them was for availing the Widow Pension, but actually contained text mentioning withdrawal of the RTI filed in Chamni Devi's case! Being illiterate, Chamni Devi could not read the text and therefore did not understand the larger plot to weaken her plea in the Housing Scheme (Indira Awas) case. However, as the RTI was filed by the Association, it could not be withdrawn by individuals. When no information was made available on the RTI application, an appeal was filed by the Association with the RTI Appeals Officer at the Sub-Division headquarters at Sadar Hazaribag, as per the provisions of the Act.

On 10th February 2009, members of the Association again went to the Block Office to enquire about the case. A new Block Development Officer had taken charge. He ordered that the copies of all three cheques issued to Chamni Devi be shown by the Division Office. It was found that only two out of three cheques had Chamni Devi's thumb impression on the receipt, while the other had a different thumb impression. The members fixed a time with the officials for further inquiry into the matter.

Two days later, in the presence of the Panchayat Sevak, Gram Panchayat Supervisor, Mohd. Akhtar Ansari, members of Sangathan and people from the village, all cheques were re-examined to ascertain the authenticity of the thumb impressions. It was once again established beyond doubt that only the receipts of the cheques for the first two installments had Chamni Devi's thumb print.

The Panchayat Supervisor asked for 15 days to complete the enquiry; it had been clearly established that fraud had taken place. Two days after this took place, the Village Council Supervisor came to the Association office at Hazaribag and proposed that he will ensure repayment of the money by the Panchayat Secretary. The Association workers said that the money must be returned in front of everyone.

On 09 March 2009 the Panchayat Sevak, Gram Panchayat Supervisor and a clerk from the Block Office came to the Association office, and in the presence of the new Block Development Officer, the Panchayat Secretary and Supervisor were made to apologize to Chamni Devi, and hand over the amount of the third installment. All the officers of the Block had been transferred during the span of this struggle, and the new Block Development Officer assured the Association of Empowered Women Alone that efforts will be made from the government's side to link the members of the Association with government schemes. He requested that the Association withdraw the RTI case, which they did. Chamni Devi was happy after receiving the third installment, the members advised her to continue the construction work of her house, so that the fourth and final installment of the scheme would be paid to her.

The corruption in this case would not have been brought forth had members of the Association of Empowered Women Alone, Jharkhand not been persistent in their efforts on behalf of Chamni Devi. Chamni Devi's victory in the face of deep-rooted systemic corruption is a very significant achievement for people in this area. It has also boosted the morale of the Association members, as people now view the Association as a force to reckon with.



Raped and Battered, She Refuses to Give Up

Kaushalya Devi

Village: Gangraidih

District: Giridih, Jharkhand

Kaushalya has faith that one day truth will emerge victorious. Circumstances are not in her favor, but she has not lost courage. She is giving a tough fight to the people who have tried everything they could think of to ruin her, and are still trying to create havoc in her life. In the last 3 years, there has not been a day when she has been at peace. But Kaushalya Devi refuses to give up, and The Association of Empowered Women Alone, (Ekal Nari Sashakti Sangathan), Jharkhand, has been with her in all her struggles.



In 2006, Kaushalya Devi's husband died of Tuberculosis. Since then she has been earning a living for herself and her two young children by working as a labourer, mainly lifting cow dung from the animal stable, and house cleaning for a well-to-do family in the village. Her husband's brothers, instead of helping her, have become the bane of her existence. Since the death of Kaushalya's husband, her brother-in-law, Jagdish Rana, has been trying to snatch the share of land that was her husband's and now belongs to her. He cut the Indian Rosewood Trees (sheesham trees) that stood on this land and planted Jatropha (ratanjot). When Kaushalya tried to stop him, he started hurling abuses at her and threatened to throw her out of her home. Disturbed by this incident, and the threats that she was receiving regularly from her in-laws, Kaushalya put the matter before the Village Council (Panchayat). When the Village Council was called, she presented papers to prove that she was the owner of the land. Jagdish Rana and his wife again started abusing her, and refused to discuss the matter. The Village Councilors left without coming to any

decision, as everyone was afraid to speak against Jagdish Rana and his 6 sons, who controlled a lot of muscle power in the village.

Four to five days after the Council Meeting had been called, Kaushalya was eating dinner with her children when someone knocked at her door. The hour had grown late; it was raining heavily; and most of the villagers were busy immersing the idol of Lord Vishwakarma as it was a festival day. Kaushalya was reluctant to open the door. Soon the knocking intensified into banging. She asked who it was. On learning that it was Saryu Rana, Jagdish Rana's son, Kaushalya's reluctance grew. But the banging had grown so loud that she was afraid the door would come apart. So she opened the door. Saryu Rana was drunk; he pushed her aside and entered her home. Immediately he started beating her mercilessly. He pushed her son to the ground. Saryu Rana dragged Kaushalya inside one of the rooms. He continued beating her, tore off her clothes, bit her like an animal, pushed her to the ground and raped her. After he had raped Kaushalya Devi, he came out and started beating her son.

Kaushalya tried to rescue her son, but was no match for Saryu Rana's strength. Fearing for her son's life, she ran to Jagdish Rana's house for help. There she found Jagdish's wife and one of his sons waiting outside. They asked her what was the matter. Kaushalya's face had swollen badly due to the abuse meted out by Saryu. She pleaded with them to save her son from Saryu! Jagdish's other son went and rescued the boy. Due to the liquor that he had consumed, Saryu had fallen down, unconscious on the ground. Jagdish, who was also present in the house, said that he could not stand the shame brought on to them by his son's misdeed, and said that he would commit suicide. Hearing this, Jagdish's wife started abusing Kaushalya, calling her the cause of all their troubles.

In the mean time, Saryu's brothers brought him back to their house. When Saryu's mother and wife questioned him, he started beating them as well. To control him, all his family members locked him in a room. At around 4 a.m. when Kaushalya started to leave their house, the women of the household asked her not to leave. They said

that, "If Saryu wakes up to find you gone, he will beat us up for not having kept you here." Kaushalya did not listen to them and immediately went to Mahavir Rana's house. Mahavir heads the family for which Kaushalya works. She narrated the whole incident to Mahavir's daughter-in-law, who advised her to immediately report the matter to the police. Kaushalya was too exhausted to walk to the police station, and therefore requested Mahavir to arrange for a vehicle. In the meanwhile, Kaushalya consulted a few other villagers and also contacted some members of the Association of Empowered Women Alone. Some Association members questioned Saryu about the incident, but he denied any knowledge of the matter. When Saryu's family learned that Kaushalya and the Association of Empowered Women Alone were planning to report the matter to the police, Jagdish Rana approached them and said, "Beat my son with a broom or give him any punishment that the villagers decide, as he has committed a mistake, but don't take this matter to the police!"

Knowing Jagdish and his family well, Kaushalya and the Association members did not change their mind. Hiring a tractor, they all proceeded towards the police station. On the way, Saryu Rana, along with a few members of the powerful Bandot Community (Rajputs) from the neighbouring village, blocked the vehicle with the intention of stopping them from lodging a police case. But when they saw the state Kaushalya Devi was in, they stepped back. Saryu Rana once again attempted to block the vehicle but was not successful, as the others did not support him. Kaushalya replied to him, "We have paid for the vehicle. Who are you to stop it?" She filed a complaint in the police station. From there she was sent to hospital for treatment. She was in such a bad condition that she had to be admitted for seven days. In the meantime Saryu Rana surrendered in court. After spending three months in jail, he got out on bail.

Kaushalya knows that Jagdish Rana is an influential person. He has six sons whom people fear, and thus, no one says anything against them. Since July 2008, Jagdish Rana has encroached over all her share of land and has also filed a false case of dacoity against

her! He is constructing a house on Kaushalya's land! No one from the village is willing to help her. In the present situation, she needs legal help. The Sangathan has appealed to the District Legal Services Authority to arrange a lawyer who can fight her case in court.

For Kaushalya, each day brings a new struggle, but she is facing all this with immense patience and courage.



A Good for Nothing Husband - Not Wanted

Sunita Devi

Village: Dugana

Block: Ponta Sahib

District: Sirmor, Himachal Pradesh

Sunita's parents separated when she was just 6-months-old. Both her father and mother remarried. Sunita ended up living with her maternal grandparents. As a child, she would often cry for her parents, but they had both started new lives in which there was no place for Sunita.



Sunita studied upto the 5th standard after which she dropped out of school. Sometime later, she joined the stitching and weaving center in Kafota, a nearby village. When she grew a little older, she met a boy named Sushil. Sushil used to visit her maternal uncle's home in Kafota. Sunita and Sushil liked each other and wanted to get married. They got married in 1995 when Sunita was 17. Sunita and Sushil lived in Shamali village. Sunita was happy to marry the person she liked. But, Sunita's happiness didn't last long. As the family grew, so did the responsibilities. Sushil seemed to have lost interest in earning and the family was in a dire straits. Faced with such a situation, Sunita started making a living for the entire family. As the responsibilities shifted to Sunita, Sushil started spending his days loitering with his friends and would not contribute in any way.

Sunita was now the mother of three children. Sushil took no responsibility about Sunita or the children. He seemed to take it for granted that bringing up the children and meeting the family expenses was solely Sunita's responsibility. Sunita came back to Kafota village

so that she could be near her family. She stayed in a rented room with her husband and children. At Kafota, she joined a carpet weaving center to make a living. Shifting base didn't bring any change in Sushil. He continued in his irresponsible and insensitive ways. Sunita was a silent spectator. She would try and manage everything; including paying her husband's expenses, as she thought there was no other option.

One day Sushil told Sunita that he wanted to open a shop and that he would like Sunita to give him the money to do so. Sunita expressed her inability to come up with the large sum of money that was required. Sushil suggested that Sunita should become a member of a self help group so that she could take the money as a loan. Sunita was hopeful that once her husband had a shop, he would start working and would not waste his time in bad company. So she agreed to his suggestion, and became a member of a local SHG called Shraddha. She took a loan of 10,000 Rupees from the group. Sushil set up a small bakery with this loan. The bakery did not continue for even a month. Sushil would hardly ever be there at the bakery; he would spend all his time with his friends. He had also started drinking. As Sunita had taken the loan, she was worried about how it would get repaid. Whenever she tried to talk about this with Sushil, he would become annoyed and start abusing her, and he would start finding faults with her. Not knowing what to do Sunita would stay quiet.

Sunita was already distressed about Sushil's behaviour and then something happened that completely shook her up. Sunita had brought a maternal aunt to Kafota so that she could learn weaving and stitching. Sunita's aunt was illiterate and Sunita had thought that the training would be useful for her, as she was earning her living as an agricultural labourer. Sunita's aunt started staying with them. While Sunita was busy fending for her family, her husband and aunt developed an intimate relationship! All this happened behind Sunita's back – she had never even dreamt that the two people close to her

would cheat her this way! When Sunita first began to suspect that something was wrong, she tried to discuss it with Sushil. Sushil denied everything and accused Sunita of being characterless herself to think of such things.

Ultimately one day, Sunita's husband and her aunt eloped!! After a few days, Sunita learnt that they were both in Panipat and had gotten married. The incident left Sunita extremely disturbed! She had lost control and felt that she could not go on any longer. It was the thought of her three children that made Sunita pull herself together.

It was at a meeting of the Association of Strong Women Alone (Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan), Himachal Pradesh in Kafota village that one of the members told about Sunita's story. The members decided to approach Sunita and tell her about the Association. On learning of the Association of Strong Women Alone, Sunita was happy to become a member. The members assured her, “Now you are not alone, the Association is there with you.” They said that if you want your husband back, we will fight against this illegal marriage. The Association's members' assurance and support had infused strength and courage in Sunita. After much thought, she decided that she no longer wanted anything to do with her husband. She would live independently and take sole responsibility for her family as she had been doing for so many years. She said she was better off without a husband who was there in name only!

Sunita continues to struggle for her livelihood. She earns a little from carpet weaving. There is no other source of livelihood. Her association with the Association of Strong Women Alone (Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan) has helped her to gain a lot of information, and moreover, she has developed the self-confidence to demand her rights. The Village Council (Gram Panchayat) was not listing her family in the Below Poverty Line (BPL) list. She went to their office and said, “If you are not registering me as the head of a BPL family,

kindly give in writing that I am not poor!” After this, the Village Council put her on the list. She also applied for a grant under the Indira Housing Programme (Indira Awas Yojna). Her application has been sanctioned. Sunita does not have land to build the house on, so she has taken a bank loan to purchase small plot of land. She has purchased the land and has gotten it registered. Throughout all this, the Association has been with her. Today she looks forward to a brighter future for herself and her family.



Driven From Her Home

Chando Honhoga

Village: Dubla Beda

Block: Dumariya

District: Eastern Singhbhum, Jharkhand

Though 45-year-old Chando has a home, she cannot live in it. Accused of being a Witch and driven out by her own son, Chando is now at the mercy of a relative.

Chando's problems started with the death of her husband fifteen years ago. Chando was responsible for bringing up her two children - a son and a daughter. Chando's husband's family was a joint one. Her husband's elder brother was a government doctor and lived in the nearby town of Dhanbad. His wife and children lived in the village in the ancestral house. Chando also lived in the same house. Her brother-in-law took retirement and returned to the village. After he returned, he told Chando to leave the house. Chando was given only one of the twenty bighas of agricultural land that the family owned¹¹. A small house against the nearby hill was built for her and her children. Chando was unable to raise her voice against this injustice and therefore tried to manage with the little that she had. Fighting poverty every step of the way, Chando managed to provide for the children. After some time, she got her son Jitendra married. Chando was happy about her son's marriage, and felt that she had successfully completed one of her responsibilities. But Chando's problems were far from over.

Chando's brother-in-law started inciting Jitendra, her son against her. Slowly Jitendra turned against his mother and would often misbehave with her and his sister. Things came to a head two years ago when he started living separately from his mother and

¹¹Bigha – 1.75 bighas = 1 acre. The family owned more than 10 acres, and gave her about ½ acre.

sister. He also took away the one bigha of land that for many years had been the livelihood of the whole family. To turn public opinion against Chando so that no one would support her, Jitendra and Chando's brother-in-law spread the rumour that Chando was a Witch. They told this to all their relatives and acquaintances. No one in the village was now ready to help Chando. Driven from her home, she constructed a small shelter in the village and started staying there. Knowing that Chando was alone, men from the village would knock at her door at odd hours with the intention of taking sexual advantage of her.

Tired of all this Chando left her husband's village and returned to her natal family in Rangmatiya. She started staying with her father and would help him with the farming. Chando did not have a brother and both of her sisters were married and staying with their husbands. Being aware of Chando's plight, her father gave her 10 bighas of land to farm during her lifetime. When her sisters' husbands heard of this, they started troubling Chando. They called a Meeting of the Male Community Elders (caste Panchayat) and put false allegations on Chando. The Community Elders sided with the sisters' husbands, and ordered Chando to pay a fine¹². When Chando refused to pay the fine, the Elders ordered her to leave the village. Forced by the decision of the Meeting of Male Community Elders, she had to leave. Eviction seemed to have become the story of Chando's life. Thrown out by her in-laws and her own son, Chando couldn't find a home even with her parents!

When Chando heard of the Association of Empowered Women Alone (Ekal Nari Sashakti Sanghatan), Jharkhand she contacted State Committee Member, Parvati Gop. After the initial contact, Chando took part in the June 2007 Block Committee Meeting. She shared her situation with all the members. After listening to

¹²A fine – note that Chando was only called a Witch when an issue around property arose. Now, she is ordered to pay a fine – a fine because she is a Witch? a fine because the brothers-in-law wanted money and the land? There is no logic.

everything, the Enquiry Committee made up of Association members decided that they would meet Chando's son and brother-in-law. In September 2007, when the Committee members went to Dubla Beda, they found that Chando's sister-in-law and daughter-in-law had gone to visit their natal homes. As soon as the members reached Chando's house, her brother-in-law left. They waited for several hours but he didn't come back. The Committee members talked to Chando's son but he categorically refused to let his mother and sister stay in the village, and he also refused to pay his mother and sister any money even though the land that he was farming also belonged to them.

After this incident, the Committee members realized that Chando's family would not see reason and therefore, they approached Kailash Chandra Haimbrem, Secretary, Majhi Pargana Mahal. Majhi Pargana Mahal is the community mechanism for justice for the tribal people living in that Region. A meeting took place with the Association Enquiry Committee, Chando, Majhi Pargana Mahal, Chando's family and the villagers of Dubla Beda in attendance. In this meeting, the villagers and Chando's family accused her of being a Witch. However, it was decided that Chando would be allowed to reside in the small hut against the hill. For a few days Chando stayed there, but in February 2008, her family and the villagers again ganged up against her, accusing her of Witchcraft. They forced her out of the village again.

With the help of the Empowered Women Alone, Chando reported this matter to the police. The police sent notices to Chando's son and her brother-in-law. A meeting again took place with the members of the Association, Chando's family, Secretary of the Majhi Pargana Mahal and villagers all present in the police station. Chando's family and the villagers again accused her of being a Witch. They refused to let her enter the village. Chando did not reach the police station in time for the meeting, and so no decision was taken.

Today Chando lives in a relative's house in the village Damudih of Dholabeda Village Council area (Panchayat). She works as a daily wage earner. Whatever she earns, she gives to her relative as he has permitted her to stay in his house. Community mechanisms to gain justice for Chando seem to have failed; knowing this, the Association of Empowered Women Alone advised her to file a case against her son and brother-in-law. But Chando, out of love for her son, does not want to do this. She is afraid that he may get punished.

She is not as pained by the fact that she is homeless, as she is by her son's betrayal – the son whom she had slogged to raise single-handedly.



Bringing Hope to Others

Renuka C. Kunjadiya

District: Surat

Gujarat

Renuka's ambition was to study and become either a teacher or a nurse. But her parents married her off when she was only 16-years-old. At that time, Renuka was studying in Class 12. Her husband's home was in a village. Brought up in a city, and used to studying hard, Renuka was unhappy with life as a stay-at-home daughter-in-law. Realizing that Renuka was finding it difficult to adjust, her father-in-law allowed his son and Renuka to move to the city of Surat. Renuka wanted to continue her studies, but her in-laws were opposed to this. However, Renuka's husband was supportive and she managed to complete her B.A. degree. She took up a teaching job in a private school. Renuka and her husband had decided to delay having children. Her in-laws would tell her husband that they would arrange to get him remarried and that he should leave Renuka. But they were happy together, and continued to live independently in Surat. Over time, Renuka gave birth to two sons. The family was happy and things were going well.



Twelve years after their marriage, her husband developed a skin infection. He took medicines for a week but to no avail. He was tested for HIV and the test results showed that he was HIV positive. He did not disclose this to Renuka. Renuka sensed that her husband was under great tension and stress. One day, she looked through his medical file and came across the HIV test results. Renuka talked to a few of their close friends, and they all told her that her husband had forbidden them from telling her. Saddened and perturbed by this news, she urged him to go to the government hospital for treatment. He was worried about the social stigma and therefore wanted to keep

it a secret. But his condition worsened. Renuka informed her husband's younger brother about his illness, but he refused to help, and forbid them from coming to the village. Her husband was shocked and disturbed because of his brother's response. He felt that he did not have many days to live and wanted to go back to his childhood home.

Renuka's sister-in-law, (her husband's sister), was the only one who came to their aid. She took Renuka and her husband to her home. Renuka had to return to Surat as she was now the only earning member and could not continue being absent from the school any more. She promised her husband that she and the children would come back to be with him in the Diwali vacations. When her brother-in-law came to know that Renuka's husband was at his sister's place, he feared social boycott, he and other family members brought him to the village. Renuka would enquire daily about her husband's well-being and they would tell her that he was all right. But one night they rang her up and asked her to come to the village immediately with the children. Upon arrival, she saw that her husband was very serious. He had lost weight and looked like a skeleton. He was in a critical state and was unable to recognize anybody. On seeing him in that condition, she could not contain herself and started crying. Her mother-in-law said, "What is the use of crying now?" Renuka was perplexed by her attitude.

Renuka and her husband were isolated. The children were not allowed to meet her. Utensils for her husband and her were kept separately. The next day, Renuka gave him a hot water bath and cleaned him. He opened his eyes and talked to her. Renuka requested her in-laws to take him to the hospital. But they refused. They said that there was no use spending money on him.

Three days later, he died. Due to the shock and grief of her husband's demise, Renuka's condition became critical. She was unconscious for 3 days. Renuka's parents admitted her to a hospital in Ahmedabad. Her in-laws said that she should be kept at home or she would bring disgrace on them. Angered by their attitude, Renuka's sister replied, "We have no wish to kill our sister."

Renuka stayed in the hospital for 5 days but her condition did not improve. Doctors advised her family to take her home and give her

whatever care they could. Renuka was taken to her aunt's house (her mother's sister's house). Her mother and aunt nursed her. They would tell her that she had to recover for her children. After 20 days, the doctor examined her again and said that there was a problem in her blood. They did not tell her that she was HIV positive. The medicine they had prescribed was expensive, and not realizing the gravity of her condition, Renuka bought only a week's medicine.

Against everyone's advice, Renuka moved back to Surat. She was worried about her children. Her health did not improve. She would fall sick again and again. The expenses for her medicines, the children's education, and her household items were being borne by her father. Renuka stayed in Surat for six months, then her father took her back to her natal home. He arranged for Renuka's elder son to stay with her brother and got the younger one admitted to a residential school. Renuka's in-laws asked for the custody of the children, but were not ready to take Renuka. Renuka refused to let the children go with them.

Some time later, Renuka moved to her aunt's place in Ahmedabad. Here she recovered her health considerably. Her weight increased from 27 kgs. to 50 kgs. Now that Renuka was better, she did not wish to be a burden on her parents. She came to Surat and started giving tuitions and computer classes. When she had settled, she called her elder son to Surat and admitted him in a school there.

Once, when she had gone to the hospital, she came to know about the organization, 'Gujarat State Network of People Living With HIV/AIDS'. She visited the organization and learned that many HIV positive people work there. She also started working with the organization. She got a job in the Volunteer Counseling and Testing Centre. She called her younger son to come and stay with her. Now both Renuka's sons were with her, she was economically independent and was doing useful work. But she continued to struggle for other people's rights.

Renuka would often think that there must be so many other Positive Women who were facing the hardships that she had overcome. The thought of such women at other people's mercy would pain Renuka. She gave much thought to this, and resolved to form a State Level Forum for Women Living With HIV/AIDS. When

