

Mahila Mandal (Women Groups) Programme

Introduction:

The Mahila Mandals (Women groups) are CORD's Goumukh and Gangotri as they are the very source for from which the various concerns of a village emerge and



Mahila Mandal awareness camp at Tamraipakkam

from which the multifaceted components of CORD have arisen. The Mahila Mandals are aptly named CORD's Goumukh & Gangotri. The Ganges is considered the ultimate 'purifier' in the Indian tradition. Gangotri glacier is the mother and bed of this cleansing flow. Likewise the Mahila Mandals are the organizations that purify the villages, making them better, healthier, more ideal places to live, especially for women. The Mahila Mandals are Goumukh of CORD and the community development women it's Gangotri in which all programmes get shaped and rooted for CORD.

Mahila Mandal is a village level forum for women to discuss their personal, social, political, spiritual and economic concerns. The Mahila Mandal continues to be the hub around which the integrated programme has been designed. It is the heart, core and spine of CORD. Women have played a crucial role in strengthening these groups. Women have transitioned their energies from themselves to their families and then finally to the development of their very own communities and villages. Many women have been empowered by this process, finding new strength not only to help themselves, but those around them.

The true asset of these Mahila Mandals has been their ability to think together and be together. The Mahila Mandals always meet at least once a month in order to analyze their problems and find applicable solutions within their means. Such solutions often contribute to the betterment of the lives of the Mahila Mandals' members and the community in which they live. Thousands of women are coming out of their shell with the selfless assistance of Mahila Mandal.

Since 1985, CORD Sidhbari has facilitated 568 Mahila Mandal with 22,415 members in 562 villages of 13 developmental blocks of district Kangra, Himachal Pradesh. CORD has also facilitated Mahila Mandals in Tamilnadu and Orissa under its comprehensive integrated rural development programme. In Tamilnadu, CORD Siruvani has 4 Mahila Mandal & CORD Thamraipakkam has 4 Mahila Mandal. In



Orissa, CORD Deuladiha has facilitated 16 Mahila Mandals and CORD Lathikatta is working with women through 81 SHG; Mahila Mandals are in the process of formation. Recently started CORD Centre at Gajpati in Orissa is in process of formation of new Mahila Mandals.

What is Mahila Mandal?

Mahila Mandal is a community based rural women organization. Generally it has more than 20 members. It has an elected executive body of Pardhan, Up Pradhan, Secretary and Treasurer.

Objective of Mahila Mandal:

- To enable women to unleash their innate potential, individually and ability to work collectively.
- To provide a forum for rural women to discuss their personal, family, social, economic as well as spiritual concerns.
- To comprehensively address issues like social justice, poverty, health, education, environment, and local self governance through the empowerment of rural women.
- To make self dependent and wise decision makers by increasing responsibility and prioritizing issues using collective thinking.
- To make women move from insecurity and instability to security and stability.
- To sensitize women to their local issues.
- Integration of every village women with Mahila Mandal for her self development and to make her aware of her rights so that she will make positive contributions towards the development of her village.
- Comprehensive development of the village through village women.
- To examine avenues for women to stand on their own feet such as through Self Help Groups for micro-credit and community based livelihood.



Formation of Mahila Mandal:

Interested women of a village get together and organize a meeting in which to discuss the formation of a Mahila Mandal. After the consent of all women to have a common forum for their overall development, the women then form a Mahila Mandal. CORD plays a very significant Role in formation and facilitation of Mahila Mandal. The Mahila Mandals usually fix monthly membership fees of Rupees two (2) to Rupees ten (10) per member with which they undertake community intervention.

Activities done at the centre under Mahila Mandal programme:

- On the 1st of every month Mahila Mandal follow-ups are observed at the centre.
- Regular sessions are held for upgrading and building capacities of Mahila Mandal leaders
- Participatory and mutual sharing of resources, skills for successful planning, and implementation and reporting techniques.
- Networking with stakeholders in the community and at the centre.
- Block wise training and exposure with focused, participatory training programmes on health, disability, livelihood, panchayat, yuva mandal, literacy and participatory Natural Resource Management.

Activities done at the field under Mahila Mandal programme:

- Regular monthly meetings.
- Mobilization, networking with community groups especially Yuva Mandals and Panchayat, to strengthen participation and inter-linkages. Participation in Yuva Mandals and Panchayat meetings.
- Addressing issues affecting women such as gender, social injustice, alcohol abuse awareness, female foeticide, women's role in Panchayat, cleanliness drives, clean water sources, trees plantation, ensuring literacy and education.
- Supporting other women and children in distress.



Mahila Mandal at Orissa repairing a poor woman's home

- Spreading awareness through nukkad natak, topical songs, rallies, puppet shows, films, plays and quiz programmes.
- Providing space and conducting income generation activities, Balwadi and adult literacy classes.
- Accessing help from different departments of the government, as required.
- Conducting special meets and events for exchange programmes in the villages, for both men and women.
- Participation in exchange programmes in villages to learn about successes in agriculture and agriculture allied fields such as dairy, bee keeping, fishery, sericulture, etc.

Process adopted by the Mahila Mandal programme:

- Demand from village women to help form Mahila Mandals.

- Mobilization for more beneficiaries.
- Sensitization of beneficiaries.
- Concretion with consensus, of beneficiaries- for formation of groups.
- Electing leaders and providing training in leadership, operational management, as well as imparting ongoing capacity building.
- Registration of Mahila Mandals with Block Office under the Societies Registration Act as an entity to access help from concerned authorities, maintaining accounts, etc.
- Building capacities of leaders and members to develop their community based group for local action, with active participation from all members in terms of space, time, efforts, chanda etc.
- Moving from instabilities to stability, by increasing participation in decisions, influencing Programmes, increasing responsibility, and building ownership facilitating voluntary efforts by village women.
- Prioritizing issues with collective thinking and arriving at decisions, Resolving conflicts.
- The time frame of each step, from formation to stabilization, is widely variable, specific local issues addressed relevant to the people concerned.
- Assessing and analyzing those feasible actions with special consideration for local resources, strengths and opportunities, planning activities and strategies with people active participation.
- Working out and implementing action plans in the field on various issues such as poverty, social injustice, environment, education and literacy, local self governance, enabling livelihood for the disabled.
- Developing reporting systems based on programmes, shaped by responding to people.
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- Forming and nurturing Self Help Groups.
- Networking Mahila Mandals for exchange and promotion through good examples, sensitizing and networking.
- Encouraging networking with various line departments of the government and other institutions.
- Mahila Mandals form the nodal point of convergence and divergence for all our village programmes. They are the fulcrums through which village development committees, Upgramsabhas will become more relevant to people, as they increase their capacity to respond with our facilitation.



- They will form village development committees with youth and men to take up responsibilities together. The Upgramsabhas will further strengthen their forum, which in turn will strengthen the Gramsabha of the panchayat.
- Our programmes are oriented towards a Result Based Management approach, with an emphasis on outcome, sustained over time.
- Comprehensive integrated rural development is easy to put in words. However, to translate the holistic values to all programme components is complex and challenging, to say the least, Nevertheless, it means a more worthwhile journey, albeit a prolonged one.

Mahila Mandal exposure trip

We conduct regular monitoring and evaluation of Mahila Mandals in a participatory manner on issues of management, record-keeping, participation and group democracy, conflict resolution, understanding of issues, capacity of leaders, implementation of changes, networking & integration capacity, sustainability, building Self Help Groups & Village Volunteer Resource Persons.

Identification & training of VVRP (Village Volunteer Resource Persons) on following issues:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health • Education • Alcohol Abuse • Marginalized groups (Single Women, Disability and Old age) • HIV/AIDS • CBL-Non Farm Sector | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CBL-Farm Sector • Sanitation • Water • Bal Vihar • Panchayati Raj • Adolescent Girls groups (Yuvati Samuh) |
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Below we are giving only one story, however each of the Mahila Mandals have several stories where they have differences collectively or individually as a Mahila Mandal:

Success story of Mahila Mandal in Panchrukhi Development Block:

On October 5, 2006, a demonstration (sit down protest) was organized outside the Palampur Sub Divisional Magistrate's Office (SDM's Office), protesting against the inordinate delay in receiving the remains of Shri Bacchittar singh, Village Menjha , Block Bhawarna, who had passed away in Saudi Arabia. The deceased's widow, Smt.Pummi Devi, performed his final rites without waiting for his remains because the Saudi Arabian Government was demanding Rs.60, 000 from the Indian Government as the cost of sending his remains back. When a community welfare organization, the Dr. Bhim rao Ambedkar Society, learnt of the cremation sans the remains, concern led them to investigate the matter. They



petitioned the SDM's Office to resolve the matter, but even three months later, nothing had occurred.

The secretary of the Society, Shri Dalip Kumar, approached Smt. Rajni, a Community Development Worker at CORD, responsible for the Panchrukhi Block to persuade the M.Ms affiliated to CORD to stage a dharma, which could have an impact at the Central level. Over 90 women, along with ten members of the deceased's family and five members of the Society, shouted a slogan denouncing (Murdabad, Murdabad'-death be to you) the SDM's Office, the area's M.L.A (Member of the Legislative Assembly), the H. P. Government and the Central Government. A representative came out to meet the widow, and he was warned that if within 10 days the remains were not received, "wait and see what we will do- if the if the government can spend lakhs and crores on ministers travelers often with their families tagging along, why can not an Indian nationals remains transfers expenses be paid? The poor, especially a schedule cast citizen that shri Bhachiter singh was, obviously did not matter." It was significant that the women protesting were from all castes. And as Shri Dalip Kumar had stated, these were awakened women ready to help a stranger which was very unlike the village women whom the society was representing. The poorest must have access to the fastest of redressals of a grievance. When asked why the office did nothing earlier the S.D.M pleaded that his office had been ineffective despite all sincere attempts. Well, the power of a united vote bank, even in hundreds, can shake up the system.