

Phones help empower women

In India, if true development has to be designed and pursued, it requires multi-stakeholder integration of issues and solutions.

Kutch is the largest district in India with about two million people spread across 966 villages with 70% literacy. Kutch is also fast industrializing because of which, local communities say, crime and alcoholism have been rising.

Last week, I travelled around Bhuj and Nakhatrana areas of Kutch, where I interacted with no fewer than 100 women of various slums, villages and village councils. They all had one thing common: they are in some way or the other associated with KMVS—Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan, which is actively working in the district since 1989.



I found KMVS is not only an organization of women collectives but has grown into creating several independent entities with autonomous legal community based organizations (CBOs) and has formed producer-based companies, including a registered body of elected women *panchayat* members to politically empower women and work as knowledge-based organization to create para-legal members of 300 women who work round the clock to fight violence

against women through the use of mobile phones, among other tools.

Today, KMVS has grown from a single collective of rural women to a network of seven grassroots women's organizations comprising more than 20,000 women leaders, managers, livelihood practitioners, pastoralists, farmers, artisans, fishers, wage workers, musicians, elected representatives, traditional birth attendants and single self-employed women, who have come together at various levels as organized collectives and facilitated a range of impacts in the larger perspective of strong and equitable democracy.

What is significant is that in Kutch, if you meet any of the women who is a KMVS member, their level of knowledge and awareness about their status and rights is high. These women have taken the onus of earning more than Rs. 1.1 crore of business by selling their craft using a Facebook page to drive customers to generate enquiries. They have also formed a group that runs a public radio station broadcasting 2 hours of fresh programmes every day involving communities of Powerpatti cluster of 26 villages of 30,000 people in Nakhatrana block, 60km west of Bhuj.

Move to more interior villages of Nakhatrana block and you will meet women of the Rebari community who have created a CBO called Saiyero-Je-Sangathan, which has helped open 750 bank accounts of women members involved in agriculture and milk supply.

However, the most significant development of KMVS is its response to the increasing alcoholism among communities resulting in higher incidence of violence. If you look at the Bhuj police station record of the past two decades, the total recorded cases of violence against women were just about 2,500. But the same record book says women-related cases have been as high as 755 in just two years starting May 2010. And the reason is "Hello Sakhi"—the mobile phone-based call centre for reporting cases of violence against women anytime between 8am and 9pm.

Hello Sakhi is a legal aid programme run, managed and executed by women community members of KMVS, whose strongest part is its linkage with the women police station in Bhuj. Hello Sakhi has two volunteers who sit with two cellphones right in the office of the lady sub-inspector at the women police cell—one to receive calls and the other to make calls when it is required. In the field, Hello Sakhi has one woman legal counsellor in each block supported by several para-legal trained women in slums, villages and *panchayats*.

The learning for me is that in India, if true development has to be designed and pursued, it requires multi-stakeholder integration of issues and solutions. And the approach has to be bottom-up involving women as central role players and making information and knowledge as tools of empowerment without ignoring political empowerment. It also needs to be underlined that the most powerful information tool of 21st century is mobile phones, especially for illiterate communities in India.

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