***How women’s self-help groups are supporting***

***the fight against the COVID outbreak in India?***

Note by Varun Singh and Gayatri Acharya (31 march 2020)

As India fights back the coronavirus pandemic with an unprecedented, 21-day, nationwide lockdown of 1.3 billion people, the women’s self-help groups (SHGs), supported under the World Bank supported National Rural Livelihood Mission[[1]](#footnote-1), have emerged as important community-based platforms that governments are leveraging. What started as a leap of faith some 15 years ago is paying off in spades. State Governments and District Administrations across India are leveraging the social capital and the social outreach of these women’s SHGs to meet critical shortages in masks and sanitizers, run community kitchens and restore fresh food supplies, provide food and support to vulnerable and high-risk families, provide financial services in rural areas, and disseminate COVID advisories among rural communities. In “war time”, these institutional platforms of poor women are proving their strength. This note summarizes the early examples of responses that are spearheaded by the 60 million strong women led groups of India.

***On the frontline of the COVID health response: Running helplines, disseminating COVID health advisories and counselling.*** Women’sSHGs are running helplines, disseminating COVID advisories on health, hygiene and essential services, and using social media among their networks to prepare the citizens. Kerala’s statewide women’s network, *Kudumbashree*, is showing a systematic approach to social outreach and social preparation by spearheading the State’s ‘*Break the Chain*’ campaign among its 4.4 million member families. *Kudumbashree* is using nearly 160,000+ WhatsApp groups, posters and weekly meetings among its 17,000+ neighborhood groups to spread awareness of public health and hygiene in cities and villages, including remote tribal hamlets. Tele-counsellors are running a gender help desk to help women who need assistance, and Community counsellors and emergency volunteers are keeping in touch with people in quarantine and high-risk groups, following health guidelines specially developed for Kudumbashree groups.

In *Odisha*, SHGs are managing social media groups for spreading awareness and curb misinformation on the pandemic. The recent, devasting impact on migrants who were misled on transport information shows how critical it is to have good, verified information. The state government has specially targeted the women’s groups with information leaflets to prevent individual and community spread of COVID-19. Through *Jeevika in* Bihar, COVID awareness campaigns are disseminating audio messages among SHGs. The *Jharkhand* State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS) is supporting the SHG women to disseminate awareness on hand hygiene and social distancing. Women’s groups are also running a dedicated helpline for migrant workers and vulnerable households. Similar initiatives are underway in Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Sikkim and several other states.

***Meeting the shortfall in masks, sanitizers and protective equipment.*** *Kudumbashree* has taken the lead by establishing more than 300 mask making units and 20 sanitizer manufacturing units spread across Kerala. Over a million masks have been produced and sold to health care workers in last 3-4 weeks to support the fight against COVID outbreak. The central Ministry of Rural Development was quick to cite Kudumbashree as a model to be emulated by the SHGs in the country and following their advisory, many States are supporting Women’s SHGs in manufacturing masks, sanitizers and protective clothing. State governments, police and health services are benefiting from these social enterprises.

In last couple of weeks, SHGs in *Odisha* have produced and sold more than 600,000 cotton masks. In *Uttar Pradesh*, production of PPE for paramedics and doctors is being done in 8 districts. More than 270 SHGs have been engaged in making 1,500 masks and PPE kits every day. In *Maharashtra*, SHGs are meeting the increasing demand for masks for government’s frontline workers in health, early childhood education, nutrition as well as for primary health centres (PHC) in the rural areas. Similar initiatives are underway in Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Sikkim and several other states.

***Community Kitchens for Migrants and the Poor***. Self-help groups are also operating community kitchens during the coronavirus lockdown to provide meals to the needy. Kudumbashree groups, having several years of catering experience behind them, were the natural option to be given the responsibility for running these community kitchens for migrant workers, homeless persons, and destitute households. Following strict safety and social distancing protocols, migrant community kitchens have been set up in Perumbavoor, for more than 40,000 migrant workers staying in labor camps. Food is also being delivered to people in home quarantine, migrant workers, the destitute, and the bedridden patients. In *Tripura*, the state Government has advised the urban local bodies to engage SHG federations in the state for providing cooked food to homeless and poor persons during the lockdown. A similar approach is adopted in South Goa, where the district administration has tied up with the SHGs to set up and run the community kitchens. In *Jharkhand*, the district administration is monitoring incidence of hunger and starvation in the communities through the SHGs – a potential fall out of the impacted food supply chains.

***Groceries and Vegetable Supplies in urban and rural areas***. Following the national lockdown, supply of food, vegetables and essential commodities has been badly hit, especially in the urban centres. In *Maharashtra*, the agriculture department is relying on the farmer producer companies (FPCs) to ensure supply of vegetables in urban areas. Individual FPCs are also entering the urban markets on their own. In *Jharkhand*, JSLPS has initiated online sale of vegetables in Ranchi from its Aajeevika Resource Centre in Angara. In *Odisha*, the state government is setting up temporary vegetable counters and providing transportation to small farmers to sell their produce in district and urban centres. SHGs are also providing doorstep delivery in many cities, while maintaining social distancing norms.

**Providing banking and pension services.** In *Chhattisgarh*, SHGs are actively engaged in distributing pensions and direct benefit transfers (DBT) to citizens and group members. In *Bihar*, the women banking correspondents, called *Bank Sakhis,* continue to provide last mile banking to SHG members and DBT account holders in rural areas. Many Banks have provided financial incentives and special orientation to the *Bank Sakhi* to continue to provide uninterrupted financial services in the rural areas. Government has designated *Bank Sakhis* as ‘essential services’ exempted from the lockdown.

Pictures and stories of the *Bank Sakhis* and other SHG members engaged in providing COVID response from across the country are regularly updated on the special COVID page of NRLM[[2]](#footnote-2) – providing inspiring testimonies of their immense courage, and dedication to serving and safeguarding their communities, in the face of the unfolding COVID epidemic.

1. Government of India’s National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) is a co-financed by the World Bank. NRLM has scaled up the SHG model across all 30 states of the country, reaching more than 60 million women who have saved US$1.4 billion and leveraged US$20 billion from commercial banks. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.facebook.com/DAY-Nrlm-Covid-19-113554706959420> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)