

## EMPOWERED

# Celebrating **MOTHERS** who stood by their **DAUGHTERS**

*As Mothers' Day was celebrated the world over this month, we at Project Umang, salute the spirit of some extraordinary mothers from rural Jharkhand who have negotiated personal challenges & confronted social norms to support their daughters' aspirations.*

An empowered mother is better able to raise her daughters into productive human resources with enhanced agency. This is the core idea behind Project Umang that is being implemented at Godda and Jamtara districts in Jharkhand since 2019 for elimination of child/early marriage and promotion of girls' education. Based on the theory of inter-generational transmission of empowerment from mothers to daughters, Umang has been capacitating members of women's collectives with knowledge, communication/negotiation skills and agency that enable them to have a larger say in household decisions, especially on issues concerning their daughters' future. In the last four years, Umang has reached out to more than 1.6 lakh women through SHG structure[1] making them realise the influence they possess in shaping a better future for their daughters.

This month we bring you stories of courage & grit determination of some mothers who have risen above odd circumstances. These mothers are role models for other community women to support their daughters and an inspiration for us to continue our efforts. They have been felicitated this month at special events held on Mothers' Day by JSLPS and PCI India in Godda & Jamtara districts.

*With inputs from Lakshmi Thiagarajan and Bhumik Bhatia*

## PRIORITISING EDUCATION when Daily Life is a Struggle

For 34-year-old Saraswati Bagti, feeding a family of five members, including her three children, is a daily struggle. This resident of Bagdehri village in Jamtara district makes a living by selling fish, while her husband, Nadiya Bagti (40) works as a wage labourer in brick kiln. While she struggles with meagre income to make ends meet every day, it is commendable that she is determined to educate her three children. "Owing to our poor financial status, we face constant pressure from relatives and community members to either get our elder daughter, Anju (14), married early or make her contribute to family income through some job. But we resist all such pressures and ask her to focus on her studies," says Saraswati, who herself is illiterate as her parents couldn't afford her education.

Her priorities found an echo when she got associated with Project Umang as a member of Bajrangbali SHG in Bagdahri village, Khajuri cluster, Jamtara. "Umang sessions are creating awareness on the relevance of girls' education, ill effects of child/early marriage. These sessions also enhance our communication and negotiation skills," says Saraswati.



Anju has recently been enrolled in high school Bagdehri at grade 9. Younger daughter Manju (11) and son (7) are studying in village primary school at grades 6th and 2nd respectively. "I never think of education as a liability. Being an illiterate woman, I have often felt worthless. I don't want my daughters to grow up with this feeling," says Saraswati.

# CHALLENGING

## SOCIAL NORMS

*She went against her family's wish & sent her daughter away to Chhattisgarh for pursuing a course in medical equipment assistant. This mother resists all societal pressures to nurture her daughter's ambitions*



Thirty-five-year-old Basanti Mandal has been living a dream of making her daughter economically independent – an aspiration she couldn't fulfil for herself as she was married at a young age of 16 years. Like countless other girls, her dreams of further education and career opportunities were abruptly halted. But Basanti refused to let these limitations define her daughter's destiny.

Like any other mother-daughter duo, Basanti and her daughter, Shilpa Mandal, share a deep bond as they often talk about mundane things. As a member of Chhaataboodhi Ajeevika Sakhi Mandal (in Kamaliya village, Kundahit block, Jamtara), Basanti has attended Umang sessions and realised the significance of enriching mother-daughter communication around education & career. So, when 17-year-old Shilpi expressed her desire to get into medical stream last year, Basanti left no stone unturned in supporting her.

"As I didn't have much knowledge about career options, I enquired from others and received counselling from Umang team," says Basanti. Counsellor informed her that Shilpi was eligible for an 10-month course on Dresser/Medical Equipment Assistant (MEA) by DDU-GKY that offers training, accommodation, and food to students free of cost.

However, the training centre was at Rajnandgaon district in Chhattisgarh, which is roughly 900 km away from Kamaliya village in Jharkhand. The next challenge was to convince her husband, Prashant Mandal (who works as a farm labourer) and in-laws who weren't willing to take the risk of sending Shilpi so far away all alone. Basanti's father-in-law saw no scope in making her granddaughter study and thought the money could be better used in her marriage.

In the region where Basanti belongs to, getting a daughter married off early is considered 'safer choice' than sending her away for higher studies. This is a deeply engrained social norm as child/early marriage is perceived as a means for lesser dowry while delaying age of marriage is believed to reduce the chances of finding suitable match & increase the risk of girls having an affair or even eloping, thus inviting disgrace to family.

But with enhanced negotiation skills acquired through Umang sessions, Basanti persistently kept convincing her family. "I told them that I fully trusted our daughter and insisted on the value of making her financially independent before her marriage. On their concern over education expenses, I countered that the course was free of cost. Next, they were wary of the distance & safety. So, I ensured them that I will take complete ownership. Meanwhile, Umang team members also interacted with my family. After a month of repeated negotiations, they finally agreed," says Basanti. Shilpi has been enrolled with the DDU-GKY course this January and has become the first girl from her village to step out for higher studies.

Meanwhile, Basanti who was earlier an SHG member, has started working as an Active Woman since 2022 and currently looks after four SHGs including hers. Her unwavering commitment to her daughter's aspirations, along with the support she received through Project Umang, has changed not only her own life but has also inspired countless women to break free from societal & familial pressures and emerge as beacon of empowerment for their daughters. "I wasn't given a chance for education, but the same shouldn't happen with my children," she says.



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# VALUING THE GIRL CHILD

*She has raised her three daughters alone as husband abandoned her over son preference. Embracing her hardships with a smile, she has ensured that all her three daughters (aged 12, 10 & 6 years) are enrolled in school.*

Poonam Devi from Parsiya village, Godda, has overcome many hardships to raise her daughters. As a young bride at 16, Poonam had a difficult start of a marital life that was marred by regressive norms & expectations, particularly the pressure to bear a male child, failing which she was subject to abuse and intimate partner violence.

After giving birth to two daughters in a row, Aashtama (12), and Anshu (10), within four years of marriage, she was forced to leave her marital home & live with her parents, who had minimal resources to support her.

However, despite all odds, Poonam, who had only studied up to 12th grade, prioritised her daughters' education by providing tuition to children in her neighbourhood.

"I was determined to educate my daughters at all costs and took up many jobs over the years to survive," recalls 30-year-old Poonam. In 2017, she got associated with Maa Durga Ajeevika Sakhi Mandal in her village (under Saachpur Saakhi cluster, Godda) as a bookkeeper. That was also the year her youngest daughter Riya (6) was born.

Her dedication led to her becoming an Active Woman in 2018 whereby she became responsible for 12 SHGs (including 7 new SHGs that she formed). However, her husband, Jitendra Saw (who works as a migrant labourer) continued with his lack of commitment towards his daughters unless Project

Umang was introduced in 2019.

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was an eye-opener to community members, including my husband," says Poonam. Umang team also counselled Jitendra who reconciled to live with Poonam. Today, Aashtama is enrolled at 7th grade in Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV), Maheshpur, Godda, while Anshu & Riya are studying at 6th and 1st grades respectively in village school.

"Umang sessions have made me more determined to focus on girls' education, not only for my daughters but for other girls too. I feel motivated to help with re-enrolment of school dropout girls," says Poonam.

# A TORCHBEARER OF **GENDER EQUALITY**

*When husband denied education to her daughters, she started taking tuition to pay for their fees. This 12th pass mother has ensured equal learning opportunities for her son & daughters.*



Dolly Devi's journey is reflective of the transmission of empowerment over generations. Having been raised by a single mother (as Dolly's father had passed away early), Dolly had grown up watching her mother stand against societal pressures to prioritise education of her three siblings.

"I was married at the age of 22 years, which was considered delayed in those times. However, my mother had ignored all criticisms and ensured that we are mentally & physically prepared before getting married," recalls 46-year-old Dolly, resident of Basantrai village, Godda, who is 12th pass. "I wanted to offer similar support to my daughters and make them more educated than me," she adds.

However, discriminations started against her two daughters after her son was born. "My eldest daughter, Shabnam, was seven-year-old then and Isha was 5. I sensed that my in-laws, including my husband, had a bend towards our son and were not willing to bear expenses of daughters' education," she recalls. Her husband, Sadan Kumar Bhagat, is a non-matric and runs a grocery shop in the village.

Determined to keep her daughters in school, Dolly started taking tuition, starting with a meagre fee of INR 50 per student. "I had got my daughters enrolled in a private school, which was around 1 km away from home. Gradually, I started managing expenses of their uniform & fees from my income," she adds. When Shabnam completed her 12th grade, Dolly sent her to pursue graduation from Millat College in Parsa in Godda, which is around 10 km away from Basantrai village.

She even worked as a private school teacher for a few years, before getting associated with Project Umang as a member of Jyoti Ajeevika Sakhi Mandal (under Baghakol cluster, Godda) and now as an Active Woman since 2022, where she manages 5 SHGs in Basantrai including hers.

Now, she conducts Umang sessions in SHG meetings and enlighten members about the value of the girl child.

With time, Dolly has witnessed a gradual shift in people's mindset. "Those who would criticise me for my daughters' mobility & education, now appreciate me. People have started valuing girls' education. They are also delaying daughters' age of marriage in her village where 12 years was the average age earlier," says Dolly.

"Project Umang has played a big role in this attitudinal shift among community members. It has created an awakening at community level," she adds.

This 12th pass mother has offered equal learning opportunities to her son & daughters. Her eldest daughter, Shabnam (22), is a graduate and has been married recently while her son (16) is in 12th grade. Her younger daughter, Isha (21), is in BA and aspires to pursue either BED or MBA. "She doesn't want to get married soon and I will support her education," says Dolly.

"I feel so grateful to Umang sessions that has given me articulation to my thoughts," she says.

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