I. Abstract

“Kashi,” or Karma Sangh, began its operations in 1998 and undertook the Rural Legal Literacy Project (RLLP) in 2000–2001. The RLLP functions to increase legal awareness among rural women in targeted villages of Gujarat (a state in Western India). The project, financed by the Ford Foundation, also provides rural women with health services, counseling on family disputes, assists them in accessing social services under government schemes, and helps them in undertake savings activities.

Women are encouraged to form self-help groups and seek answers to their own problems. For this purpose they are educated on various legal issues such as divorce, property rights, physical and mental torture, rape, dowry child abuse, and minimum wages. Groups of women jointly undertake various productive activities of common interest such as savings activities, work related to children’s education, spreading health-related awareness among women, and so forth. Training is provided in various areas such as healthcare activities, leadership, and management skills. Workshops and seminars facilitate experience sharing and discussions on issues of common concern.

RLLP has been instrumental in building the legal awareness of women in about 150 villages of Gujarat. This case study covers a few examples that highlight the role played by RLLP in enhancing the confidence of women and enabling them to undertake various productive activities.

II. Background

Women in rural and urban India often face abusive situations related to dowry, domestic violence, physical and mental torture, wife-beating, sexual abuse, and so forth. Cases are filed and campaigns are initiated, but the impacts so far are mixed. Most of the time victims do not get justice, the accused are acquitted, and these incidents slip out of public memory. Many victims face endless, time-consuming litigation. Many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and social groups in India have initiated action to counter this situation. This case study highlights one such venture entitled the Rural Legal Literacy Project (RLLP), undertaken by Kashi (Karma Sangh) in Gujarat, aimed at bringing about legal awareness among women in the targeted project area.

Kashi began its operations in 1998 when it was registered as an NGO. The organization provides relief and emergency services to women, widows, and orphaned children in distress. The organization has been implementing RLLP that aims to bring about legal awareness among rural women in the Sanand and Bavla blocks of Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The project covers about 100 villages of Sanand Block and 50 villages of Bavla block. The Ford Foundation, Delhi, financed the project from 2000–
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2002 through a grant of Rs. 26,00,000 (approximately US$55,320). The foundation approved the extension of the project till March 2003. The main objectives of the project are as follows:

- Provide women with information about the legal aspects of areas like maintenance, divorce, property rights, physical and mental torture, rape, dowry, child abuse, and minimum wages.
- Make women aware about their rights and status in society.
- Enable women to become independent through self-generating activities.
- Empower women and create a strong foundation on which Mahila Mandals (women’s groups/organizations) can integrate to form a Mahila Sangathan (federation of village mahila mandals covering several villages) for the entire region, thus enabling activities to be conducted in an organized and efficient manner. The long-term aim of RLLP is to make these Sangathans independent and self-sufficient.

Prior to the project takeover by Kashi in April 2000, the project was operative under the Jyoti Sangh, which was instrumental in doing the groundwork and preparing women from Sanand Block area to learn and work for their advancement. After Kashi took over the project in 2000–2001, the focus was on consolidation work in Sanand Block and preparatory work in Bavla block.

As a first step in the project, local women are encouraged to form a problem-solving or self-help group also known as the Mahila Mandal. The project functions through workers at three levels: Village Leader, Saathi (helper), and Field Workers. Each mandal, consisting of 10–50 women, is headed by a women leader known as Village Leader or Agewan ben. The Village Leader is appointed from the members of a Mandal based on her leadership ability and initiative-taking skills. The Village Leader reports to a Saathi who coordinates the work of the Mahila Mandals in 4–5 villages. Finally, a Field Worker coordinates the work of the Mandals in 50 villages.

Once a Mandal is formed, an attempt is made to create an environment in which women feel emboldened to discuss their problems and try and solve them through negotiation and legal procedures if required. To achieve this task, women are educated on various legal issues concerning them such as divorce, maintenance, property rights, healthcare, rape, and sexual harassment. Detailed information accompanied with suitable examples applicable to their lifestyle is given to rural women. Solutions are sought through active participation of local women. A social law committee (consisting of Sathis and Field Workers) assists women in filing cases with the court, following up with them, and handling the police processes for the same. Long-term effectiveness of the self-help groups is achieved by inculcating among women the skills of decision-making and leadership.

In addition to resolving legal issues, a variety of other activities are carried out under the project. Various other committees of Sathis and Field Workers are formed that undertake the following activities:

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4 For more information on Jyoti Sangh see: http://www.jyotisangh.org/tomorrow.htm.
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- **Panchayat (local government) Committee**
  Women are encouraged to stand for local government elections. Meetings and discussions of women who are standing for elections are arranged. Requisite training is provided for candidates and newly elected women.

- **Education Committee**
  Efforts are undertaken to enroll students in schools, especially girls. Dropout children are identified and persuaded to join school again.

- **Health Committee**
  Apart from creating health awareness among women, efforts are undertaken in helping women solve their health problems. Women are educated in the need to visit healthcare centers for preventive and remedial treatment. Committee members accompany ill women to government primary health centers and hospitals. Health camps are organized and visits by nurses to villages are organized on a regular basis.

- **Social Service (welfare) Committee**
  Women are also assisted in availing themselves of benefits from government welfare schemes and in dealing with the existing government systems. Underprivileged women and women belonging to backward classes are motivated to take advantage of various government welfare schemes such as widow’s pensions, disability assistance, and destitution assistance, to name a few.

- **Savings Committee**
  Meetings are held at the village level where women are informed of the advantages of small savings. Saving groups are formed in which women deposit Rs. 10 to Rs. 200 (approximately US$0.21 to US$4.25) per month. The amount so collected is deposited in the bank in the name of Sanand/Bavla Mahila Sangathan at an interest rate of 4 percent. Women can also apply for loans of up to Rs. 10,000 (US$212) from the savings generated.

- **Counseling Center**
  Disputing parties can file their case at the counseling center by paying a fee of Rs. 10. Before registration, an attempt is made by the Village Leaders and Sathis to help the disputing parties reach a compromise in the village itself. Most cases are resolved at the village level by the Sathis and Village Leaders, failing which the cases are registered at the counseling center.

III. Impact/Results

Perhaps the most important outcome of the project has been the transformation of rural women from being dependent and vulnerable citizens who are restricted to their homes into confident individuals coming out of their homes and visiting government

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3 The Sanand Mahila Vikas Sangathan and the Bavla Mahila Vikas Sangathan were set up in 2001 and 2002 respectively.
offices, police stations, block Panchayat offices, and so forth—all once considered formidable places for them. Women have become self-reliant and capable of handling their own problems. Awareness on legal issues has increased and women have developed better self-esteem and a sense of pride in their work.

**Text Box 1: Maniben Fights for Her Divorce Rights**

Child marriage—a routine custom in rural India—qualifies a girl for marriage when she is 12–14 years old. In accordance with this custom, Maniben, a resident of Sanand, was married to Jairambhai when she was 13. On turning 16, she was sent to her husbands’ place where she was tortured repeatedly by her in-laws in demand of the dowry. Her husband, who refused to pay heed to her, asked her for divorce as he had already married someone else in another town. Being pregnant, having little education, and with nowhere to go, Maniben turned to RLLP for help. Maniben was made aware on the legal and illegal issues of child marriage and alimony. Upon the advice of RLLP workers, Maniben refused to divorce her husband without alimony in terms of monetary benefits or a plot of land. RLLP enabled Maniben to acquire a plot of land, next to her in-laws’ home in Sanand, where she now earns a living through farming and dairy activities. Maniben not only ensured her rights were respected but she also set a precedent for the women of the area through the support she received from the RLLP Field Workers. Maniben is today one of the most active Field Workers of RLLP in Sanand block.

Sanand block has 100 registered Mahila Mandals in 100 villages. The Sanand Mahila Vikas Sangathan and the Bavla Mahila Vikas Sangathan were set up in 2001 and 2002 respectively. This has resulted in saving activities being carried out in 68 villages of Sanand, with a total of Rs. 600,000 (approximately US$ 12,760) being saved in 2002–2003. During the same period, more than Rs. 100,000 (US$2,128) were saved in the villages of Bavla block.

Due to the efforts of RLLP, women were encouraged to stand for Gram Panchayat elections. In 2001–2002, women in 20 villages were allotted reserved seats for the elections. All those who participated in these villages were elected.

The scenario of girls’ education in these villages—once considered taboo—is now slowly changing. Due to the ongoing efforts of RLLP, villagers are sending their daughters to school. In 2001–2002, around 31 girls were enrolled for school in the Sanand block.

The Counseling Center has been instrumental in tackling many cases of family disputes such as those related to divorce, dowry, and property. During 2001–2002, over 45 cases were resolved by the center.

RLLP has encouraged many women to undertake productive and income-generating activities such as running active saving groups, making artistic embroidery works, preparing and marketing of potato chips, and the making of mouth-fresheners. Women working as Village Leaders and Sathis have undertaken various activities for the welfare and development of their villages and fellow companions.
Text Box 2: Examples of Productive Activities Undertaken by Women under RLLP

- Januben is a Village Leader in Jada Village and Gajraben is a Sathi. Together, they have constantly made efforts to motivate people to seek benefit from the health camps organized in villages. They have also encouraged 60 children to pursue higher education. They have prevented child marriages and have brought a compromise in two cases of family discord with the help of the Counseling Center. Gajraben also runs a savings group of 13 members.
- Kankuben, a Village Leader of Melasna village, has encouraged many children to go to school. To tackle the problem of teacher absences, she argued with them and compelled them to perform their duties regularly. She also handles healthcare and savings activities in her village.
- Sushilaben, a village leader for six years, provides an example of how rural women can develop self-confidence through their work. Since joining RLLP, Sushilaben has undertaken many activities for the benefit of the villagers. She provides healthcare services and runs a savings group of 21 members. In case of family disputes, Sushilaben mediates between two parties.

IV. Key Elements of Empowerment

Access to Information

The project seeks to empower women by educating them and raising awareness about their legal and social rights. Education in areas such as alimony, divorce, property rights, physical and mental torture, rape, dowry, child abuse, and minimum wages is imparted. Furthermore, health-related information such as nutrition, sanitation, hygiene, preventive healthcare, and diagnosis and treatment of illness is disseminated by the health committee members during meetings and discussions. Dissemination of information is also facilitated by inviting practicing lawyers and people from local NGOs. Furthermore, training and elementary education is provided in association with these NGOs.

Inclusion/Participation

To prevent forcible abortions and prevent other forms of physical and mental torture, RLLP provides training to women through primary healthcare centers and NGOs such as Gujarat AIDS control society, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), and the Centre for Health Education, Training and Nutrition Awareness (CHETNA). RLLP also conducts the Women and Management program that focuses upon equipping women with requisite management skills to manage their Mahila Mandal effectively. Such training ensures that Mahila Mandal are independent in their activities, procedures, and principles.

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SEWA: for further information see: www.sewa.org.
CHETNA: For further information see: http://www.chetnaindia.org/aboutchetna.asp.
Workshops and seminars are also organized to share experiences and provide training. The Field Workers and Sathis narrate their experiences through role-play and puppet shows. Role-playing is also used to expose the audience to atrocities against women such as domestic violence, dowry, alcoholism, and child marriages as well as highlight women’s rights and powers.

**Accountability**

The operational structure of Kashi helps in maintaining internal accountability in the proceedings. For instance, the Mahila Mandals have monthly progress review meetings with Field Workers, Sathis, and Village Leaders. Furthermore, every January, the Mahila Mandals have a review meeting with the Managing Trustee and staff of Sanand and Bavla blocks wherein problems areas encountered are identified and the current level of progress on stated objectives is evaluated.

**Local Organizational Capacity**

RLLP has been instrumental in organizing rural, poor, and mostly uneducated women into self-help groups, encouraged them to solve their own problems, and to thereby work towards their own advancement. Mahila Mandals have undertaken various activities of common interest by working together in unison. This has enabled women to become self-sufficient and independent as they have undertaken income-generating activities (please see section on “Impacts/Results”).

Working in self-help groups and various committees has also promoted a culture of self-learning, thus enabling women to take up problem-solving roles in the future.

**V. Issues and Lessons**

**Challenges**

Although the project has many active members working towards the empowerment of rural women, RLLP suffers from lack of funds. With the grant of Ford Foundation exhausted in March 2003, the Karma Sangh is constantly looking for more funding opportunities.

Provision of legal aid and justice is often delayed due to delays in the administrative machinery. For instance, there are inevitable delays in the procedures of the widow pension scheme. Since the locus of control in such cases is not with the women members, such delays become unavoidable.

Poor literacy rates impede the advancement of women. For instance, women get elected to the Panchayat but need a minimum level of education to sustain their position and fulfill their responsibilities. RLLP attempts to address this issue through a variety of training programs.

Women are not always encouraged to join the self-help groups. In a male-dominated society, there is often resistance from family members.
Women often hesitate to register a case of sexual harassment, domestic violence, and the like, or to discuss such issues openly. However, persistent efforts have yielded results and women are increasingly registering complaints on issues that were previously considered taboo.

**Lessons**

- Formation of self-help groups promotes learning through experience sharing and empowers women as they learn to become independent and self-reliant.
- Women in rural areas are usually illiterate and poor. They need to be continuously motivated and educated through training, discussions, and awareness campaigns on legal issues and matters. Such education is also essential to help them carry out and sustain productive activities in the long run.
- Men also need to be educated on the legal rights and powers of women. Such education and awareness would contribute towards improving the condition and status of women by making men more empathetic toward problems encountered by women.

**VI. Further Information**


The information used to write this case study was gathered from several visits to the Kashi office.