

## Enhance Access to Justice by Legal empowerment of Marginalized Communities

Development Alternatives and its CSO Partners have implemented the Access to Justice for Marginalised People Project in Tikamgarh District of Madhya Pradesh from 2010-2012. The road to women's empowerment started back in the nineteen nineties by engaging in the Bundelkhand Region in both Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Madhya Pradesh (MP) with Self Help Group (SHG) formation and encouraging women to access alternatives means of livelihoods.

Women in the Bundelkhand region live in a society of extremely oppressive social values, most of them are illiterate, forced to cover their faces with purdah and often married off as children. The target group in Tikamgarh District exemplified the poor social, economic and cultural status. Over 60% of them belong to the Other Backward Caste (OBC) increasing their susceptibility to marginalisation. Additionally, 66% of the target group is illiterate and more than 50% of them are considered Below Poverty Line (BPL). The baseline survey conducted at the start of the project also outlined the extreme lack of awareness on basic rights by women in the region. For example, almost 80% of women were not aware that men and women are entitled to equal wages, nor were they aware of the reservation law for women's participation in local Governance at Panchayat level. Additionally, the majority of women were not aware of basic justice systems provisions including the use of an FIR, the concept of a lawyer and local justice systems of legal aid through the DLSA or Lok Adalats.



In order to address the basic lack of rights and entitlements knowledge, the main project activities were designed to raise awareness on the rights and entitlements of women in the community as a whole. A variety of project activities including interfaces between SHG groups and village and block level authorities, street plays and community radio programs were able to reach out to a large audience. Most importantly, the training of over 300 women and men community level volunteer Paralegal Workers (PLWs) to serve as a link between their communities and justice service authorities. The formation of Community Legal Assistance Partners (CLAP) committees in each block to served as a resource for those PLWs. CLAP committee members include judges and lawyers from the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) or Tehsil Legal Services Centres (TLSC), members of the local media, police, and rights activists. Development Alternatives directly implemented trainings and project activities focused in the Niwari block while its partners; Darshana Mahila Kalyan Samiti concentrated in Jatara Block, Baldevgarh Block was handled by New Action for Social Welfare Organization (NASWO), Palera block by Shailja Sewa Sanstan, and the two remaining; Prithvipur and Tikamgarh Block by Vikalp Madiya.

A total of 328 Paralegal Workers with 215 of the total number who are women, have been trained by DA and its partners in all six blocks of Tikamgarh. Two trainings in each block for a total of twelve trainings over five days focused on the established key issues; MGNREGS, RTI, Violence against women ( including domestic violence, dowry and harassment), equal wages, the public distribution system, social security schemes, and accessing legal aid through the DLSA and TLSC. Refresher courses were organized in the second year of the project in the months of May and June of 2012, based on inputs and regular meetings with PLWs on the type of issues they were engaging in. It was concluded that in addition to a refresher on topics

covered in the original training, the refresher course material demanded further detail of how to address serious concerns of domestic violence, harassment cases, how to file an FIR and how to more effectively use an RTI application to end corruption.

The case studies presented herein are examples of the exceptional work done by the PLWs on their own initiative. The PLWs have addressed cases that DA and its partners had not expected them to actively address but the PLWs shouldered initiative on their own to make a much larger impact on their community. These are successes that have been won against the constraints of deep rooted social norms and taboos. These are cases of women taking up the cudgels on behalf of their own kind and of men speaking up against oppression of women. However, each case does not have the perfect outcome and many are still in progress towards the final verdict, each case is a representation of change. This change can happen through the efforts of just one person who feels empowered enough to stand against the norm of accepting injustice and social oppression. The status of the cases presented below is as of September 1st 2012.

With the support of the Government of India- Ministry of Law and Justice and the guidance of the United Nations Development Programme in India, Development Alternatives has introduced the women of Bundelkhand to their rights and entitlements. There is a long way to go for true realization, however the cases studies from the field have shown that there is a want for such initiatives for empowerment of women in one of the most backward regions of India. Only with further interventions and continued support at the community level can there be hope for the women in Bundelkhand and for truly sustainable development to take place.