

FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION

# Network

Publication of IRMA

April-June 2015

Vol. 19 • No. 2



## Fuelling feminine fire

*An NGO's efforts to empower the women of the backward Mewat region*



**Basic literacy session at an LSE centre**

"Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe." (Frederick Douglas, abolitionist, editor, and feminist)

Women of the socially backward hinterlands of Mewat are visible just about everywhere- carrying stacks of fodder or delicately balancing pots of water on their heads, washing clothes beside ponds or sponging cattle. What is truly rare here is the sight of a young woman making her way to a nearby college or a female adolescent attending school with the regularity of her urban counterparts. Early marriage, early child birth, low literacy and education, limited mobility, and lowered community participation have been active barriers. A patriarchal social

order disbars the Mewate women from pursuing higher education and meaningful careers. They are, instead, exhorted to develop expertise in household chores and child bearing and rearing practices. The average marital age for these women is between 16 and 18 years and rarely is their opinion sought with regard to their future.

The average marital age for these women is between 16 and 18 years and rarely is their opinion sought with regard to their future.

Living in a constant state of denial they are unable articulate their thoughts with clarity while decision-making takes a back foot. Adhering to social norms laid down by village elders they are prevented from blossoming as leaders.

Going by the current data the female literacy rate in Mewat is an abysmal



**Girls participating in 'Henna' competition on the occasion of Eid**



*Girls watching a video clip on 'Panchayati Raj Institution' to gain awareness about governance in villages, Mewat, Haryana*

36.6 percent. Post elementary female education is low thanks to a high dropout rate. Those who manage to reach the secondary level fail to clear their exams thanks to the poor quality of basic education. This acts as a huge de-motivator for the Mewat girls while putting an end to their education as parents start scouting about for suitors with anxious urgency.

Aarti, an adolescent from Mewat, who could not clear her secondary school exams, says resignedly: "My parents gave me an opportunity to study. Now they will neither give me another chance nor the fees to study again". Aarti's story finds echoes all over the region. Stuck between the system, societal pressures and barriers, the girls of Mewat have almost nowhere to go.

It was in this bleak scenario that the SM Sehgal Foundation, a Gurgaon based NGO decided to step in and establish its Life Skill Education (LSE) centres while working towards improving the quality of mainstream

education by breathing new life into the School Management Committees (SMCs) enabling their roles as monitoring agents.

The centres offer six-month courses to female dropouts aged between 11 and 19. These courses empower the enrollees by developing their vocational skills in activities like stitching and tailoring. The courses also inculcate basic reading and writing skills so that the students become proficient with numbers and alphabets and are able to write letters and applications. This is of great help to many of those who have forgotten lessons learnt in school or haven't stepped inside a school gate all their lives.

Once basic literacy needs are taken care of the parents are encouraged to (re)admit their wards into mainstream education. Games and hands-on exercises serve as confidence-building and communication enhancement measures. For the first time, perhaps, the Mewat girls are beginning to gain a voice and allowed to dream their dreams.

Armed with better communication skills the girls are encouraged to express their feelings, comprehend interpersonal relationships, values, and gender roles and explore the community on their own terms. The LSE sessions, in effect, help them to learn by doing and take decisions in life while encouraging them to understand their roles within the community.

The LSE centres have been at the forefront of awareness drives with regard to the Right to Education (RTE), Right to Information (RTI), and important village governance institutions including the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), the Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committee (VHSNC), and SMCs. All this is aimed at increasing women's participation in governance while enabling them to think beyond reproductive roles. The SM Sehgal Foundation has also imparts knowledge on maternal and child care while stressing the importance of timely immunization, good nutrition and sanitation practices.

It also promotes awareness relevant to the prevention of common diseases like pneumonia and diarrhea. The

course is designed extensively to take care of these women's realized and unrealized needs and their interest in vocational skills like tailoring through which they can earn a living. The sessions are enlivened with the aid of audio-visual tools and small video clips. Tests are conducted every month to monitor improvement. Monthly "mothers' meetings" are designed to provide ward feedback.

For the Mewat women, whose mobility is often restricted within the village, the LSE centres offer a meeting ground where they can

share their emotional well-being and concerns, help each other read and write while enriching their communication skills. Most female enrollees have come to look upon these centres as their own spaces and take additional pains to decorate them. Occasionally, these centres double up as venues for activities like henna application competitions during festivals.

It needs to be emphasized, though, that the LSE centres are not alternatives to regular schools. They, instead, complement the education system by bridging 'learning and emotional gaps', all residues of

Games and hands-on exercises serve as confidence-building and communication enhancement measures. For the first time, perhaps, the Mewat girls are beginning to gain a voice and allowed to dream their dreams.

outdated social norms and customs. The centres are privy to some remarkable success stories that include

illiterate girls being able to read and write, girls being able to delay marriages and generate incomes by initiating their own tailoring centres post marriage.

With the LSE in a facilitating role the road towards a more liberal society has been laid. It is now up to the women of Mewat to get it rolling.

*By Shruti Kapoor  
(PRM 33)*

*Email: kapoorshruti55@gmail.com  
The author is Assistant Program Leader  
at the SM Sehgal Foundation, Gurgaon.*