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FOUNDATION



# EmpowerHER:

## Unveiling the Strength Within Women

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# PHILOSOPHY

The paradigm of the national vision has recently shifted from women-development to women-led development. However, given the reality of entrenched gender stereotypes, this will take time to become a reality in most rural areas, as agents of change are few and the requirement vast. Rural women in India face significant socio-economic barriers, which affect their self-worth, freedom in making choices, and overall well-being. Due to this they are unable to positively influence their own lives or impact their society as a whole. Women empowerment requires a holistic approach which needs to include working directly with women as well as with the whole community.





Sehgal Foundation has touched the lives of 2.03 million women across 2,000 villages spread over twelve states through its interventions centered on promoting women's inclusion, mainstreaming their participation socially and reducing their vulnerability, by empowering them through collective action and engaging them in key economic activities.



Sehgal Foundation developed its initiatives through grassroots experience and research in rural India, building resilience in vulnerable rural communities and focusing on empowering women. The crux of the method used by the organization involves community mobilization, capacity building of villagers and village committees, demonstrations of the new information and methodologies for farmer income, and promoting linkages with the government to improve last-mile delivery of its programs and services. The overarching intention of the Sehgal Foundation is to promote sustainable development by empowering people to take charge of their own development.

Sehgal Foundation provides training to women in diverse topics and issues to assist them in taking an active part of village committees during the life-cycle of development projects so they will continue to enhance the social capital of their villages.

Sehgal Foundation's endeavors that directly impact women include the following.



# Agriculture Development

## THE NEED

Female labor force participation has consistently remained low in India. Of the approximately 166 million women who are in the labor force, 90 percent work in the “informal” sector as unrecognized labor. A 2023 report by the State Bank of India suggests that unpaid women’s total contribution to the economy is around INR 22.7 lakh crore—approximately 7.5 percent of India’s GDP. These women, largely engaged in agriculture, must be brought into the mainstream economy for an inclusive and sustainable development process. A primary initiative toward this goal includes building their capacities. About 80 percent of rural women doing labor-intensive agricultural work, while the related knowledge and information is disseminated to the men. Female labor force participation indices need to increase, because this factor is a driver of a country’s growth.

## WHAT WE DO

Sehgal Foundation works with Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) to increase farmers’ advantages through utilizing economies of scale and accessing technology, credit, and markets. In FPOs, women farmers are specifically empowered, as they represent the majority of producers. Women are provided with training within Farmer Interest Groups (FIGs), which are self-managed groups having shared goals within an FPO. Since most small farmers practice traditional agriculture, their output can be vastly improved through the use of modern methods. Such training includes field demonstrations of such techniques, including a crop-specific package of practices, soil testing and improvement in soil fertility through the use of micronutrients, input-use efficiency, climate-resilient agriculture through water-efficient irrigation methods, and the use of solar technology, mechanization for small fields, crop diversification, and use of information and communication technology (ICT) in agriculture.





Besides, the women FIGs enable farm-based enterprises such as mustard expeller, and papad making, and they run the Custom Hiring Centers (CHCs). CHCs are renting facilities of various farm machinery both for the women members of the FIG as well as other women farmers, which thereby earns income for the FIG group. The farm machinery is medium to high-cost machines, for example, reaper, seed drill, chaff cutter, and others, depending on the need of the location.

## **Women in FPOs trained on sustainable agriculture practice: 927. A group of 96 women lead as Pashu Sakhis and Krishi Sakhis in villages.**

Where FPOs are absent, similar training to improve the productivity and quality of produce is provided by setting up Women Farmer Schools. Peer-to-peer capacity building is provided on a regular basis to the women farmers in the village through Krishi Sakhis.

Capacity building has special meaning for the large number of marginal farmers in India, who are mostly women, as the men often leave the village to work in places with more remunerative opportunities to supplement the family income.

An allied activity of agriculture, which is considered to be a women's domain, is animal husbandry. Sehgal Foundation provides key assistance in this area through demonstrations on improved nutrition to milch animals, by including easily available dietary supplements and other practices. This significantly improves the health and milk production of the animal, leading to greater profits availed by the women who sell the milk. Women volunteers in the village are trained as Pashu Sakhis who ensure that the message of improved practices reaches all women in the village, and they assist the animal rearers and monitor simple animal healthcare as learned from veterinarians.



Goats, commonly known as “poor man’s cow”, are an integral part of rural India. They provide additional income and insurance against calamity in agricultural subsistence societies. Selected women from poor households are trained on how to establish goat-rearing units as an enterprise. The training includes best practices in goat rearing, such as feed and nutrition, seasonal diseases, and medicines.

## Women benefited from 397 goatery units.

Food that is consumed by resource poor communities in villages is deficient in its diversity and sometimes quality, which affects the health of the people. Within the household, women hold the primary responsibility of cooking and feeding the family, even though they are typically the last ones to eat. Therefore, women are trained in growing kitchen gardens to improve health and nutrition security of their family. This supplements their food with an assorted mix of vegetables and herbs for a considerable stretch of the year. Kitchen gardens help increase household income by saving money that the family would spend on the purchase of the same food items from the market.

## Kitchen Garden Demonstrations: 5,946





# Water Management

## THE NEED

Groundwater resources in India, a lifeline for millions of people and a driving force behind economic growth are under immense pressure due to population growth, climate change, and unregulated exploitation. The rate that water is extracted significantly exceeds what the aquifer is able to recharge. Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of India's districts are threatened by falling groundwater levels. This scenario deeply affects rural women, as fetching water for the household for drinking, cleaning, cooking, and washing is perceived as women's work due to Indian patriarchy. The government has launched programs to arrest this precipitous decline; communities are at the heart of the effort, and scientific inputs are combined with traditional wisdom to address this complex challenge.

## WHAT WE DO

Sehgal Foundation's water management interventions reduce the drudgery faced by women with regard to accessing water sources. Replenishing depleted underground aquifers with rainwater harvesting improves the availability and quality of groundwater in the long run. For this, check dams, nala bunds, and recharge wells are established. Other soil and water conservation structures built are contour trenches, farm bunds, and gully plugs. The program has developed large scale plantations on water catchments to improve the quality of runoff to harvesting structures and for the slow release of water, which increases its percolation into the soil.

Traditional water bodies, like ponds and tanks, are either constructed or revived for surface storage. Ponds are simple dug out structures of natural depression where rainwater accumulates, while tanks are a complex water storage system that include catchment area, water feeder channels, bunds, sluice gates, and water channels leading to all the agriculture fields in its command area. Ponds are of particular benefit to women, as they are used by the family's livestock. Women are also members of the tank users groups.



**Structures created include 160 check dams or nala bunds, 421 recharge wells, 120 ponds developed or rejuvenated, 38 community tanks, 2,200 soak pits, and 217 soak wells. Rainwater harvesting was installed in 183 schools.**

In addition to enhancing water quantity, Sehgal Foundation addresses the water quality. The technology selected and promoted is a low-cost and convenient biosand filter, which uses sand and gravel as the filter media. This is particularly pertinent for women, as in villages, the women provide drinking water to their family. The biosand filter prevents the spread of waterborne diseases and is effective against pathogens such as E. coli, total coliforms, parasites, microbes, and worms, as well as eliminates turbidity, iron, manganese, and arsenic contamination. The Sehgal Foundation team works with women groups to promote better WASH behavior.



A theme that undeniably empowers women is sanitation in their villages, as most villages do not have a drainage system or, if it is present, it is not functional. In addition to being inconvenient and foul-smelling, stagnant water is a constant breeding ground for pathogens.

Bringing soak pits and soak wells, at the household and community level, direct wastewater into the ground. This takes care of the slush outside their homes and surroundings open wells, public water supply taps and hand pumps, as well as on the roads, even well after the rains are over.

**Water Filters Installed: 3,230**

“Dirty water used to accumulate near my hand pump. I was eager to get rid of this but did not know how. When the project team was demonstrating soak pit construction, my family readily paid the partial contribution for it, and now the place is dry”.

– Ranju Devi from Bhandari, Belsand, Sitamarhi, Bihar.





# Transform Lives one school at a time

## THE NEED

As per the 2011 Census, India's overall literacy is 74.04 percent, with a wide gender disparity (82.14% male and 65.46% female). A primary reason that children in rural areas have reduced attendance in schools is due to the absence of basic amenities in most schools. Schools lack the facilities and infrastructure to make learning a conducive and a joyful experience.



## WHAT WE DO

Sehgal Foundation found that revitalizing government school infrastructure goes a long way in the education of the girl child. Using a rooftop rainwater harvesting system, once the toilets are hygienically functional and drinking water stations are made available, most girls start attending school regularly and do not drop out, as WASH activities benefit the girl child more. Sehgal Foundation makes the campus learning-friendly by repairing boundary walls, setting up playground and plantations, creating educational wall paintings, and making other improvements. Schools are made even more vibrant for the girl child due to digital and life.

Such a school becomes the pride of the entire village. However, its maintenance is crucial. For this, the government's mandatory School Management Committee (SMC), of which 50 percent members are women, are trained on their roles and responsibilities for maintaining and sustaining improvements made.

**School Management Committees trained: 402. Schools transformed: 113.  
Over 9,600 adolescent girls undertook digital and life skills awareness course.**



# Local Participation and Sustainability (LPS)

## THE NEED

Local participation is critical for the success of any development. Communities and members of village-level institutions are constrained by poor awareness, insufficient skills, and limited resources, due to which they struggle to lead development activities in villages.

Rural women are at an added disadvantage due to wide gender gaps in these parameters including in education and general lack of confidence.

LPS initiative sets up the Village Development Committee (VDC) and Village Leadership Schools (VLS) with men and women members who take charge of overseeing social advancement in the village. Women Leadership Schools (WLS) and Mahila Sangathans are established with women participants. These women's collective members together take up development issues for the benefit of their village, as a whole or for individuals, with the panchayat and the government offices to obtain entitlements earmarked for such purposes. The women members are trained on numerous topics relevant to the lives of rural women including understanding self, self-confidence and public speaking, negotiating skills and conflict resolution, gender equity, nutrition and hygiene, government programs and services, Gram Sabha and Panchayati Raj Institutions, and other topics. The Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) of the Gram Panchayat are eager members of the WLS, whose capacity is built to perform their roles efficiently. Additionally, some members of women collectives get motivated to become EWRs.



**Women trained in VDCs, VLS and WLS, Farmer Groups, Women Collectives: 24,164**





Sehgal Foundation brings convergence of the women with government services for women such as anganwadi (childcare) centers and ASHA (accredited social health activists) workers. In some cases, it makes the infrastructure of the anganwadi centers more child-friendly to increase attendance. Upon being sensitized and assisted, women begin availing the government's social security benefits for them such as widow and destitute pensions, monetary support for the marriage of girls, financial support for daughters and mothers, and others.

The Citizen Information and Support Centre (CISC) at Nuh district of Haryana is a demonstration facility for replication, using a toll-free helpline number to ease and advance the final step of delivery of government facilities in rural communities. Many women use this facility to obtain government provisions, particularly since they are assisted in the procedure of availing them. Such a center widens the reach and benefits of government programs to the communities.

The family's health is considered to be the responsibility of women, but for which they are hardly prepared. As a strategy for mobilizing the women community through a theme of interest and benefit to them, such as health and nutrition, Sehgal Foundation brings about wellness by creating platforms where interactive awareness sessions take place separately with groups constituting women, new mothers, and adolescent girls. Topics covered include nutritious diet, and prevention of malnutrition in infants, children, especially girls; hygiene; traditional home-based remedies for treating small illnesses; prevalent diseases; utility and method of growing medicinal plants in the backyard of the home; government health programs and schemes. Trained Swasthya Sakhis further train Swasthya Sahelis to disperse knowledge on health to individual households.



## Women assisted by CISC: 18,000

Among the several entry point activities done by the Foundation team for initially establishing rapport with the community and its presence in the new villages is the installation of solar street lights which particularly benefits women and girls. Many villages are electrified by the government but in reality the electricity is quite erratic. Setting-up solar street lights at important junctions as decided by the community and the mobile solar home lights provides women with increased security, ease in household activities and economic opportunities. The girl child is able to study longer hours, and elderly women are able to visit each other after dark too. All this light significantly enhances the quality of life of women.

“ I had no idea about a balanced diet and nutrition. In our daily food pattern, we never focused on these aspects but coming to nutrition group sessions made us realize the importance of consuming nutritious food and safe water for a healthy life.

– Miskina from Gabanspur, Punhana, Nuh, Haryana





# COMMUNITY RADIO

Sehgal Foundation's, Alfaz e Mewat (rural voices of Mewat) in district Nuh, Haryana, has been a low cost oral medium which provided reliable and timely information to women, facilitating their participation in decision-making. The programming bringing the voices and opinions of rural women to the radio, interaction with authorities, inspirational stories of women change agents, relevant information on themes that interest women, and entertainment. The effort has been to portray an image of an empowered and knowledgeable woman to the rural women and their community.

The community radio has had a decade of success in Nuh, the station reached over 225 villages covering a population of about 125,000 women. The effort is being replicated in new parts of Nuh, Haryana, and also Alwar, Rajasthan.



# Conclusion

Sehgal Foundation's role in engaging with women is that of an enabler, working with rural women to inspire and bring in their active participation, accruing benefits, sharing knowledge, developing skills, and establishing leadership qualities. Sehgal Foundation's diverse initiatives empower women by offering a range of resources and support. Through training and capacity building, women gain valuable skills and knowledge. They are then provided with platforms to apply their skills through negotiation and collective action. As a result, women are able to make tangible changes in their lives, their families, and their communities. These ongoing empowerment initiatives hold great promise for the future, as they continue to uplift and transform the lives of women at various stages of empowerment.

Training is at the core of empowering women. This is an incubator where groups of women are intensively made aware of new knowledge and paradigms to prepare them both for individual and collective action in their village. Their practical capacity-building influences them deeply, most particularly in experiencing the success of collective action for getting things done, as well as the success of individual women in receiving benefits from government schemes.

***“Lagta hai humne kuch paa liya hai. Khud mein ek vishvas bada hai jaankari milne se. Hum aage badenge to bhavishya behtar banega.”***

*(I feel that I have achieved something. I have got faith in myself through the knowledge I received.  
If we go forward, our future will be better).*

As the work of Sehgal Foundation expands with more communities, active participation of women in the programs will be the key focus to ensure equity and sustainability. Recognition of women as important stakeholders in nation building is imperative for growth and development. The acknowledgement of women as farmers, water champions, and changemakers will enable them to make choices about their lives as well as contribute to overall progress as competent partners and decision makers.





# A NARRATIVE OF EMPOWERMENT

The first batch of Taruni classes in village Nunthankal, Medchal, Medchal Malkajgiri, Telangana, led to Kavitha contesting for sarpanch and winning. After she took oath, Kavitha said, “Taruni helped me a lot to learn about leadership qualities and personality development. It is fortunate for me that I contested for the elections while learning about panchayati raj institutions and government schemes. Now I can implement what I have dreamt, and can help solve the village issues.”

Within a week after assuming office, she got the dysfunctional drinking water facility repaired. Soon after, the activities implemented by her included two roads being built, underground drainage sewage system installed, a park developed, effectively had all social security schemes facilitated, and the repair of Primary Health Center. Kavitha exemplifies the power of community engagement and local participation.





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