

Agent of Change: How Bharti Championed Adolescent Health in the Juang Community

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Thirty-seven kilometres away from the district headquarters of Keonjhar in Odisha, nestled amidst hills and thickets, lies the village of Jamudiha. This community is home to Bharati Juanga, a 17-year-old with a spark that is hard to miss.

With voracious curiosity and an appetite for knowledge, Bharti's story begins with a dream to re-imagine the cultural challenges that adolescents in her community have, since time immemorial, accepted as the norm. Sometimes, the toughest questions have the simplest solutions and for Bharti, besides her will and determination, all she needed was her voice and the courage to use it.

Girlhood among the Juangs

The green rolling landscapes of Jamudiha are home to around 450 people from the Juang community. They engage in agriculture, wage labour, and the collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) for their livelihood. In this community, child marriage and silence on menstrual health and hygiene is the norm. Also, women are yet to believe that their voice has space in public narratives.

Much like her peers, Bharati grew up with a myriad of restrictions and challenges. Once elders decide something, girls are expected to follow it without questions. In public spaces like Self-Help Groups (SHGs) where senior women participate actively, young girls are not allowed. The lives and matrimonial timelines of girls are also pre-decided by elders, sometimes as early as the girl's first birthday.

As she grew older, Bharti realised that for her, a stifled voice is scarier than the consequences of asking difficult questions. Why are girls expected to just accept their fate without choice? Why do female voices in her community lack agency? Bharti set out to unpack these questions and seek more information.



Bharti engaging in a conversation about an adolescent girl's rights with an older woman from her community (Juange tribe) in Jamudiha, Odisha. Photo credit: Premananda Senapati, WOSCA, November 2020.

Enabler of Adolescent Health Rights: The Jiban Sampark Programme

As Bharti sat with her pressing questions, some of the answers were on their way. Personnel from the UNICEF supported Jiban Sampark program began conducting counselling sessions in her village to promote improved nutrition and health for the women, girls, and children. And while Bharti didn't know much about adolescent health and well-being, she allowed her curiosity to lead the way.

Shortly after the counselling sessions began, Bharti joined the knowledge-based training under the Jiban Sampark programme to learn more about health, nutrition, and hygiene practices.

From addressing behaviour change among adolescent girls to educating and supporting the pregnant and lactating women of the village, the Jiban Sampark programme was a watershed moment for Bharti and eventually, the other girls and women in her community.

Brave Bharati Makes Marvellous Moves

Soon after, Bharti's curiosity began to translate into action. Starting with her own home, she undertook earnest efforts in sharing her learnings from the knowledge trainings she had attended. Bharati stands as an agent of change, who has helped her community to remain informed on

good health and nutrition practices, including limiting the spread of the COVID-19 infection during the pandemic. From educating women on visiting routine immunisation sessions to motivating girls to participate in the Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Days (VHSNDs) - with each conversation, Bharati's influence ensured the efforts and information that the Jiban Sampark programme was offering, reach each woman and girl in her village community.



Bharati sensitizing women in her village on the importance of attending VHSNDs for maternal and child health and nutrition in Jamudiha, Odisha. Photo credit: Premananda Senapati, WOSCA, November 2020.

What began as a holistic conversation about nutrition and health in her community soon began to make more meaning of itself. Owing to the learnings from the Jiban Sampark programme; Bharati's crusade also translated into her standing up against instances of child marriage and demystifying the taboo around female menstrual hygiene.

She treated each conversation as an opportunity to counsel and educate the women and girls of her community who were now on an active journey to live more nutritionally and socio-culturally informed lives. Bharati has brought in waves of positive change in her village's outlook towards health and nutrition and become a role model for other girls in the village.

Supporting Adolescents Heroes like Bharati

The outreach activities of the Jiban Sampark programme have been instrumental in reaching and igniting a spark within many adolescents like Bharati, to become positive changemakers in their own respective communities. Armed with passion and knowledge from the activities under the Jiban Sampark programme, they find themselves as

young, empowered citizens who can bring about positive changes among people they care about. The Jiban Sampark program has been a successful model of a program that has mobilized adolescents as important stakeholders among PVTGs, who can be leveraged to improve their health and wellbeing with unwavering and commitment.

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