

How Sumitra Emerged a Hero for Adolescents and Women Among the Juangs in Odisha

Nutrition Section, India Country Office

Sumitra Juanga, at the tender age of sixteen, holds wisdom, strength and resolve in her spirit that is way beyond her years. She is the reason why many women and adolescent girls in her village of Talabaruda in Odisha, are going to lead an improved way of life than they previously would have led.

Previously destined to live a quiet life as an adolescent girl in her village, Sumitra is now a vocal, passionate young advocate against child marriage and promotes good health among adolescents and women in her community, all due to the Jiban Sampark program implemented in her state of Odisha.

Many Questions for the Curious

Inside the forested, lush greens of the Talabaruda village in Odisha, resides a community of about 5,000 people belonging to the Juang tribe. The Juangs steadfastly hold on to their traditional beliefs, customs, and practices and have had very little exposure to the societal developments of the modern world.

They rely on natural resources for their livelihoods; the hills and forests are important for traditional slope agriculture, livestock rearing, and seasonal foraging. Their affinity for conforming to their traditional ways is evident in their healthcare practices and behaviours.

Among the many traditional practices followed by the Juangs in the Talabaruda village, the practice of child marriage is one of the most detrimental practices for adolescent girls. Sumitra has grown up witnessing young girls be relegated to the margins of her community as they achieve promising adolescence, only to be married off to older men.

Not only this, but she has also always questioned behaviours among women in her community that seem contrary to what community health workers counsel them for – Why do they throw away the Iron Folic Acid (IFA) tablets instead of eating

them? Why do they miss immunization camps? Why do they not always use soap while handwashing when it seems necessary to do so?



Sumitra Juanga counselling women from her tribe (Juanga) on adolescent and maternal health and nutrition in Talabaruda village, Odisha. Photo credit: Premananda Senapati, WOSCA, December 2019.

The Golden Touch of Life: The Jiban Sampark Programme

The Jiban Sampark programme proved to be the fuel to the fire that already existed in Sumitra's indomitable spirit. The UNICEF-supported Jiban Sampark was implemented in Talabaruda by the SEWAK NGO, the Women's Organisation for Socio-Cultural Awareness (WOSCA) and other NGO partners in Odisha.

The programme aimed to promote social behaviour change on important issues such as maternal and adolescent health and nutrition and water, sanitation and health (WASH) practices and mobilised community members, influencers, and frontline workers.

The Difference Made is What Counts

Over a period, Sumitra's efforts began to pay off. Women who were initially reluctant to attend the Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Days (VHSND) started showing interest after witnessing audio-visual shows in the village.

With frequent mobilisation efforts by the WOSCA and follow-ups by Sumitra, the practice of

handwashing with soap became widespread. The biggest achievement of this campaign has been the 100% immunisation rate among adolescent girls in the village.

Thanks to Sumitra's leadership, there has also been a remarkable increase in awareness about the harms of child marriage in the village. Most importantly, girls themselves have taken active roles in preventing early marriages in the community, increasing their participation in village meetings and decision-making processes, thereby playing a significant role in shaping the direction of their community.



Sumitra Juanga counselling women from her tribe (Juanga) on adolescent and maternal health and nutrition in Talabaruda village, Odisha. Photo credit: Premananda Senapati, WOSCA, December 2019.

UNICEF Supports Success Stories like Sumitra's

The joint efforts of WOSCA and UNICEF have made a significant impact in preventing child marriage in the village of Talabaruda, and Sumitra, a true hero, has played a vital role in this achievement.

Adolescent girls in the community have shown a keen interest in using sanitary pads instead of traditional methods for managing their menstruation. The practice of handwashing with soap is now universal among adolescent girls, and they also take the initiative to educate other community members about the importance of good hygiene practices. Sumitra is actively mobilising other adolescent girls to take iron and folic acid (IFA) tablets by visiting nearby schools and explaining the importance of doing so. Additionally, she continues to encourage pregnant women to attend Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Day (VHSND) sessions

and immunisation camps. Adolescent girls are also involved in demonstrating the proper techniques for complementary feeding of infants.

Sumitra's story is one of the many success stories that have been possible due to the implementation of the Jiban Sampark program, which UNICEF is proud to support. It continues to be a heroic tale of how the program has empowered and mobilised an adolescent girl to become a champion for good health, hygiene, and nutrition practices among a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) community in India.

For more information, please contact

Sylvie Chamois schamois@unicef.org