JOURNEYS
A glimpse of some of the lives that we touched
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Meri Life Meri Choice
Meri Life Meri Choice (MLMC) is an Elton John AIDS Foundation (EJAF) supported intervention designed to reduce the vulnerabilities of girls to HIV. The project formally started in July 2011. The intervention was based in two of India’s poorest and socially challenged states of Uttar Pradesh (Allahabad and Banda) and Madhya Pradesh (Satna & Rewa).

The intervention was designed to enhance adolescent girls’ access to information on sexuality, sexual health, reproductive health, life and livelihood skills, health services and education. The specific objectives were:

**OBJECTIVE**

- To develop supportive environment around the target group of adolescent girls to exercise ‘safe behaviors’
- To enhance knowledge and skills among adolescent girls (10-19 years) in the intervention locations to address vulnerability to HIV.
- To enhance utilisation of SRH services by adolescents (girls and boys) from existing public health facilities.

**INDICATORS**

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<td>10% increase in condom use in last sex among sexually active girls (15-19 years)</td>
<td>10% of sexually active girls (15-19 years) know their HIV status</td>
<td>30% adolescent girls and boys (15-19 years) contacted the public health system for treating symptoms of genital infections in last three months.</td>
<td>30% of adolescent girls (10-19 years) reporting a supportive relationship with at least one critical adult in the family to discuss sensitive issues related to SRH</td>
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**PROJECT APPROACH**

The MAMTA approach included three key prongs:

1. To change gender norms and promote healthy relationships between men and women by working with:
   - **Adolescent girls and women:** Enhancing adolescent girls’ access to information on sexuality, sexual health, reproductive health, life and livelihood skills, health services and education to expand opportunities and life options that are critical to addressing vulnerabilities to HIV. The proposed project used a gender transformative approach. It involved males in a culturally sensitive and rights based manner to address root causes and intervening factors. The project comprised of a combination of individual level, community level, civil society level and government sector interventions.
   - **Gatekeepers:** Recognizing the role of community, the project targeted the community members especially the gatekeepers who are the significant members in family (parents and husbands, parents
2. **Health service providers:** The identified local public service providers and adolescents were involved for knowledge provision (orientation and sensitization) and advocacy on matters of gender, inequity, sexuality and SRH to promote sexual and reproductive health of adolescents. To leverage government resources for the young by extending services to the young for sexual and reproductive health through the existing public health services at the community level.

3. **Economic enablement linkages:** Intended to build the capacities of the girls to earn money for themselves (if required), reducing the vulnerability attached to economic dependence. Girls exposed to this intervention are significantly more likely to have knowledge of safe spaces, to be members of a group, to score higher on indexes of social skills and self-esteem, to be informed about reproductive health, and to spend time on leisure activities.

To operationalise the above intent, Meri Life Meri Choice ensured:

- **The criticality of safe spaces:** A place where adolescents shed their inhibitions and interact, meet and share thoughts and opinions with others, where ‘Peer Mentors’ contribute in facilitating girls’ linkages to various services (education, health, government schemes, scholarships, livelihood opportunities).

- **Behavioural change communication:** An environment building intervention dedicated to changing community perception about adolescent sexual health and rights.

- **Linkages for appropriate services:** To actively connect adolescent girls to SRH information & services and economic opportunities to facilitate access to loans and government schemes for promoting entrepreneurship.

- **Greater Involvement of People living with HIV and AIDS (GIPA)**

- **Evidence based advocacy:** Advocacy with policy makers to make the policy and programs more gender equitable and responsive to the adolescent sexuality and sexual health needs. The project aimed to **strengthen the evidence** in terms of SRHR of adolescent and individual level change by using **rigorous and appropriate research methodology** and meticulous data collection through establishment of **Management Information System (MIS).** The learning was to facilitate joint District/ State PIPs for convergence of ARSH into NRHM. Advocacy to include concepts, ideas and elements of the project to lead towards policies for a broader impact.

**PROJECT DESIGN**

Girls were mobilised from their homes into Gender Resource Centre (GRC) and taken through formal sessions on issues of adolescent sexuality, SRH needs, adolescent HIV vulnerability, safe behaviours to prevent HIV risk, life skills: problem solving, negotiation, communication, etc, financial management skills such as budgeting, saving, bank account, etc.

Through a mapping exercise potential participants and peer mentors were identified from amongst the marginalised (socially and economically) populations (SC, ST, Muslims, OBCs, below poverty line families). One to one meetings were conducted with the families of the girls and permission for them to attend the GRC sessions sought. The support of the local self-governance members (Panchayat Members) was also enlisted for mobilising the girls and identifying a secure space. The parents of the girls were organised into a parents group while local leaders, teachers, influential persons from the community and the frontline workers (ANM, ASHA and AWW) were organised into a Community Support Group. Bi monthly meetings were conducted with each group to build a supportive environment at the family and community level.
Peer Mentors, chosen from the community and trained and assisted by a community worker on a need basis, were trained for two days on the curriculum of the four sessions scheduled for each month, and guided the members through those issues. Girls and boys were organised into discrete groups for training. Comic card and posters on various issues (menstruation, gender roles, migration, HIV, HIV testing and living with HIV) were used to reinforce messages. Street plays and wall writing were used to disseminate messages at the community level to reach a wider audience including those adolescents who were not a part of the GRC.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Spell I (Proof of Concept Phase): Target group 10-14 year old mixed group, 15-19 years old girls (unmarried, married, in school, out of school), 15-24 year old boys (brother of girls identified and husbands of the married adolescents) were identified and recruited through a social and vulnerability mapping process. This was one phase of 10 months.

Spell II: After the Proof of concept phase, the 10-14 year old group was dropped. The focus was shifted to:

- 15-19 year old girls: Unmarried out of school as one group and
- Another group of married girls (15-21 years)
- Boys group of brothers and husbands from 15-24 years of age.
- This was implemented in three phases of six months each.

Spell III: No cost extension phase, the focus shifted from adolescent girls to women with migrant husbands. Thus the unmarried girls group was dropped and two girls/women’s groups were formed:

- Married girls/women between 15-29 years
- Married women: 30-35 years
- Boys (potential migrants): 15-19 years
- Migrant husbands: during their visit home during the intervention phase.

The Gender Resource Center was housed in a public space, usually the Anganwadi Centre, Panchayat Bhavan or the Community Centre. Basic material, dari, bucket, mug, games were provided. BCC material (developed for the project) of comics, posters and board games were provided at each centre.
A Village Energized - A Village Empowered
Where Awareness Bolsters Communication
Communication, Community And Commitment
Counselling Leads Not Always To Success
From Strength To Strength
From A Shattered Home To A World Of Hope
Administrative Support Multiplies Results
From Disinterest To Determination
Opportunity Builds Steely Resolve
Discrimination Countered By Distinction
Playing The Field With A Difference
Education And Skill For Empowerment And Independence
To Independence Through Information
Empowered And Enthused
The Weak Inherit Agony
From Recklessness To Responsible Behavior
The Power Of Information
Enthusiasm Breeds Empowerment
Pangara village in the Nagod block of Satna district is no stranger to developmental initiatives. A village with a fairly large population of roughly three thousand inhabitants that boasts of over two thousand five hundred voting population, Pangara is the ideal location to test and authenticate development initiatives. The location of the village is such that it combines both the urban and rural ethos in its makeup. This makes the population far more enquiring, aware and proactive in its own development efforts. This is also why it was an ideal choice for the roll out of the Meri Life Meri Choice program with the partnership of the AES on the ground.

Pangara has been the ground for all three phases of the MLMC programme and the effort to create a cadre of skilled, fully informed and trained adolescents capable of making local planning more responsive to young people’s sexual and reproductive health needs was followed by the migrant workers and young migrant women/wives’ groups as well as the ultimate in rural health networking-the gala health camps. A result of the high level of interaction between the community and the local Panchayati Raj Representatives in the course of the program led to the holding of gram sabhas in the villages of the locality including Pangara and this gave rise to opportunities for the peer mentors to be included in the Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committees-a singular achievement for the adolescent role holders. This also heralded the intimation to all VHSNCs in the vicinity to include the peer mentors of the MLMC project in the committee-recognition of the positive impact of the program at another level.

A quick attempt to relive the gram sabha experience led us back to Pangara and it was heartening to find a reasonable number in the group gathered to meet us, despite a late night intimation of the interaction. The discussion on MLMC elicited mixed response, till we got to the part where the program outcomes were mentioned. There the unequivocal response was highly affirmative. The top of mind recall was for the fact that for the first time, information was being shared with a group of individuals who had never been the point of interest for the administration-the youth.

Given the size of the village, Pangara had seen the setting up of five GRCs, and had nurtured fifteen peer mentors who had reached out to a base estimate of at least five hundred people, including both GRC and non GRC member attendees. This should have had the capacity to transform the village with its impact and as our interactions seemed to indicate-so it did, to a great extent. The program was rolled out to a great deal of skepticism in the beginning as the village had seen several interventions from different organizations on matters of education, health and hygiene. However, the very format of the MLMC program, that sought to address and engage the adolescent population, intrigued the youngsters and the peer mentors who were selected after the initial round of interactions were eager to begin their work.

The gathering of members was not a major issue as awareness of developmental activities was high and objections were fewer to handle. The problem lay in maintaining regularity in the attendance, especially with the young boys and men. The program format included activities such as board games and other physical sport and this was one of the means of keeping the meetings energized and lively as well as
The young men found the discussions on sexual behavior, preventative and contraceptive methods and STI/RTI/HIV the most significant and useful. The younger boys had faint recollection of the content of the curriculum but HIV had remained embedded as a piece of key information and they were still able to rattle of means of transmission and prevention, agreeing that this information would stand them in good stead when they moved out of home to work or study. Significant also was the increase in the use of condoms and the demand from the local providers - the ANM and the ASHA worker, with a sizeable portion of that demand being generated by the women. The peer mentors are still in touch with group members and are sought for referrals in cases of STI/RTI and contraceptives.

The presence of the current sarpanch and a couple of village elders whose grandsons or granddaughters had been part of the program lent further weight to the impression that though some details may have been lost in the transmission or due to transition of time, the basic purpose of the program had been met. Memories were alive and the messages still significant, connections had been maintained and safe behavior was in practice, gender perceptions had been changed and attitudes modified and above all, the will to continue imparting knowledge and sharing information is deeply entrenched in those who were a part of the program, because they truly believe the learning to have meaning for themselves.
Arti Khushwaha: peer mentor

“The women are still in touch with me and still approach me for anything they need. Even new members of the community know that they can speak to me about these issues. The programme made this possible.”

Dhirendra Kumar Khushwaha: peer mentor

“The street plays-nukkad natak-that were enacted in the programme helped a lot to understand what the issues were that we were dealing with. Sometimes that is all the difference-whether you understand the context or not. We did.”

Lakshmi Khushwaha: peer mentor

“This was a wonderful programme. It has changed my life so much. I am far more respected in the in-laws’ place and far less restricted. They know their bahu is neither characterless nor loose witted when they see the respect I get from group members and the way we all bonded during the project.”

Manish Khushwaha: peer mentor

“I have a masters’ degree in Political Science, so I understand completely what we are trying to do. My entire effort is towards one thought only-how can we help the people around us in the community live better and healthier and this programme had the ideal content for that.”

Ravi Kumar: GRC member

“I don’t have much opportunity to discuss the issues with very many people, but one thing I know for sure is that I am going to make sure I remember all this when I take on the role of a house holder. This I life changing information!”
WHERE AWARENESS
BOLSTERS COMMUNICATION

The purpose of the Gender Resource Centres envisaged for the implementation of the Meri Life Meri Choice was to design a space that young girls and their families considered ‘safe’—safe to go to, to interact in, to air their views in, to be seen to participate within, but most of all, to help conquer the hesitation to communicate freely within the family systems and to be able to establish relationships on a personal level through enhanced communication. In the Kamasin village of the Kamasin block of Banda district UP, this purpose was certainly demonstrated to be a success.

Sarita, a reserved and shy young girl of the village, hesitantly joined the GRC, more as a means of getting out of the house than as a learning experience. Restricted to the house even after having completed her graduation and with no option of continuing her studies further, Sarita was more or less resigned to being married off at the earliest opportunity, never having made an independent decision about her own life. The MLMC programme came as a welcome diversion. An innate introvert, with little or no conversational skills, Sarita’s participation in the group was hardly noteworthy in her initial meetings. She was not sure how the information was of help to her and therefore did not share or communicate much. However, as the curriculum unfolded and many issues and skills were explored, Sarita found herself gaining a foothold by applying the communication techniques she was learning in the training classes. Sarita had never spoken of or been spoken to about several of the issues discussed openly in the forum. Boys, sex, menstruation, gender perceptions, all of these were topics completely alien to her. The concept that she had rights that she could ask for and expect to receive in itself was a revelation and brought about a sea change in her own perception of herself and her life. She realised the utter unfairness of the restrictions that she was facing at home, including those that prevented her from attending college despite it being within the village precincts. Sarita decided that to make a difference elsewhere, she needed to begin with making a change within her own family. She had never ventured anywhere without her father or brother by her side, yet, the GRC meetings gave her the courage and ability to place before her father her desire to study further and move to Banda to work and study at the same time. She was able to place her own viewpoint regarding the discriminatory practices of her family within discussions that led to changes favourable to her. This emboldened her further and she opened up in discussions amongst the members, speaking of her life and the way she was attempting to make a difference with lessons learnt here at the centre.

Her initial attempts to discuss gender issues with her father were unsuccessful and almost resulted in her being forbidden to continue with her membership. However, with the help of the community worker and with the cooperation of the peer mentor, Sarita was able to get the curriculum modules home and shared them with her father. Once he had seen and understood the purpose of the curriculum, he was more open to her participation and began to pay attention to the things that Sarita had to say. He was even convinced enough to attend the parents’ meetings and try and participate with an open mind. Sarita managed to restore a sense of balance in the division of household work, getting her brother and father to help her mother and sister and herself by taking on tasks that were possible for them to easily execute and unburden the women of the family.
Sarita, in the meanwhile, enlarged her own friend circle to include the members of the group and gained increasingly more confidence with each relationship that she forged. When the group peer mentor had to move out, the ultimate statement of confidence came in the form of Sarita being chosen to execute the role of peer mentor till the end of the project.

Today, Sarita has not only moved out of the village to work and study outside, but has carved a niche for herself in the family as an active decision maker, thereby easing the path for her younger sister who dreams of following medicine as a profession. Sarita herself is doing a dual course—her Masters’ degree running simultaneous to a professional course in Fashion Technology in the ITI. Her elder brother has moved to the city with her and despite the taunts of other family members in the larger circle, her father has undergone sufficient attitudinal change to personally supervise the transition of both his children from the safety of their village home to an apartment in the city where both live and study while earning their livelihood.

Sarita’s mother, never having had the opportunity of education herself, is also determined that the change that the programme has brought about in her household will continue so that her younger children may benefit and society may witness the change and thereby replicate it amongst their friends and family. The GRC may have folded up now, but the results are there to see and experience and will, hopefully, remain in the minds of the participants and their families long enough to be replicated and carried forward in multiples.

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**VOICES**

**Sri Ramprasad: Sarita’s father**

“I was never really much into the ways of society—I did what I could to keep my family safe and well and dictated the terms that I thought were the best because they had been followed over generations. But times change, and so must we and that is what Sarita helped me see with the introduction of the curriculum module on gender discrimination. For the sake of development, whether personal or general, however, I know we have to change, so I did. Now I am proud of the way my daughter has emerged—stronger and more confident. I have one less worry in my life—she is no longer helpless, but in fact a source of strength to the family.”
Sarita’s mother:

“I was never granted the opportunity for education—none of us three sisters were. I determined my daughters would not go through the same trauma, but was unable to do much about the discrimination. That has changed now. Now I too am more unbiased in my treatment of my children—perhaps society had taught me to favour my sons, but my daughter taught me to respect her and other girls in the same manner. How can this be bad? It is a wonderful thing to happen.”
COMMUNICATION, COMMUNITY AND COMMITMENT

The long drive towards Chitahara village in the Manjgama block of Satna district is breathtakingly beautiful, reminiscent of story books on village life. The village itself is dreamy and laid out in a spaced and leisurely manner. The air pulsates with quiet contentment, breathes relaxation, and here, it has reason to do so. Chitehra is a village that is one of the best governed villages in the area. The youth are enthused. The elderly are secure, the young are free and happy and above all, each one is content to be a part of the village they call home.

A portion of this contentment may be credited to the sarpanch-Rameshwar Prasad Singh-erstwhile peer mentor and community worker of the Meri Life Meri Choice project in Madhya Pradesh. The man himself is an experience to engage with. He zooms in in a flurry of dust, rushing to keep his appointment with us, on his way back from the launch of another vocational class in one of the villages under the jurisdiction of his panchayat. The energy is palpable, as he jumps out and walks briskly towards us, apologizing with firm politeness and leading us to the panchayat ghar-a long bare room with a rickety pedestal fan desultorily battling the afternoon heat near the row of wooden desks that pass for the working space of the panchayat officials.

“Why do we need a huge working space laid out in the formal atmosphere of an office? We are supposed to spend most of our time in the community anyway and any money we save, can be used to replicate programs of benefit such the MLMC one!”, says he. The measured cadence of his speech is explained when one hears that he is an advocate by profession, with considerable experience in the field and a decent practice which he set aside to assume the duties of the sarpanch.

One wonders what could motivate a practicing advocate to set aside this lucrative business and take on the mantle of peer mentor for a development project intervention. The MAMTA team community worker had approached him to participate in the migrant group as peer mentor for the maker migrant group. The young lady appointed to execute the role of the peer mentor for the women’s group had been forbidden by her in-laws to continue on account of various misgivings. It was felt that the inclusion of a respected and mature person in the program in a parallel role would help to address those misgivings. Rameshwar Prasad readily agreed as it would not interfere much with his schedule and he saw it as an opportunity to engage with the community that he lived within.

His stint as a peer mentor brought him into close contact with the youngsters of the village community and their energy and enthusiasm touched a chord within him. He found himself enjoying the time spent in going from door to door, engaging with the youth, coaxing their parents, talking to the young women for the first time in informal surroundings, in general, delving into the intricacies of daily life in the village and getting to know the people as they were. His own enthusiasm saw him energise the GRCs with activities beyond those of the curriculum, engaging the members and making the GRC more a place they sought to be in, rather than having to spend time and effort gathering the members together for sessions.

His popularity increased dramatically as did the visibility he had, due to his consistent engagement with the community across age groups and little by
little his time commitment to the project took over the time he had set aside for his practice and he willingly relinquished that aspect of his life. In his interactions with the group, he consistently tried to encourage the participation of the girls so as to increase their levels of confidence and lead them to independent thought. Their trust in him grew and the youngsters began to approach him with issues, thoughts, queries or some support in a cause even outside of the GRC sessions, creating a cohesed group fabric. The discussions moved out of the classroom and took place under trees, in the lanes, by the water pump—anywhere that the group members moved.

The effectiveness of his leadership having been proved resoundingly, Rameshwar Prasad was offered the role of community worker for the next phase of the project—a position he accepted with alacrity. The community was familiar with him already and readily welcomed him back in the larger role. This tenure too was extremely successful and it occurred to Rameshwar Prasad that the satisfaction he gained from putting his energy and effort into bringing about awareness and change in the community, was greater by far than any he had experienced and the idea of registering himself for the panchayat elections took seed in his mind.

His thumping victory in the race for sarpanch he credits entirely to his role in the MLMC project, as he does for his own change in attitude. Even though the project is no longer active, in his role as sarpanch Rameshwar Prasad has kept the groups active with various vocational classes and involving them in community activities. Here in the sleepy hamlet of Chitehra, the MLMC legacy is a vibrant group of youngsters who move from village to village of the Panchayat, sharing information, gaining knowledge and skills, building livelihoods and knitting together a beautiful social fabric that encompasses only safe places and safe behaviors.

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**VOICES**

**Pawan Kumar Pathak: Peer mentor**

“I welcomed the chance to mentor the boys because as a Science graduate I understand the importance of the information we were asked to disseminate. There is a large Adivasi population here and sometimes it is difficult to message in a manner that they would accept—their lifestyle is very different. It was not easy in the beginning to get boys to listen, the groups kept changing, but I feel the information is so useful, even if they retain a little bit. Chitehra will change.”
"This program gave me the recognition that brought me the role of sarpanch—I owe it all to the project. Why shouldn’t I then try and keep all the wonderful things that the program included, alive? That is my aim and it has helped immensely—especially with the girls. Today the girls have a degree of freedom and independence they couldn’t have dreamt of a few years ago. My panchayat is known all over as the one that nourishes change and where the youth is actively involved in the development of the community. All of us owe this to the program. I would welcome more such initiatives at all times."
COUNSELLING LEADS NOT ALWAYS TO SUCCESS

The third phase of the Meri Life Meri Choice program was an expansion that included a large part of the communities that had not been the target population in the previous phase and this was a unique opportunity to make a difference on the ground with the migrant population and those living with HIV. One such a case was that of Suman, a widow of an economically backward segment of society, whose migrant laborer husband had left her with an HIV positive status and a destitute family to support. MAMTA’s partnership with MPSACs in the setting up of health camps in the areas that the MLMC program was running, brought Suman to the notice of the MAMTA team, who tested her children too for reactive status, alerted by Suman’s own status, fortunately finding the children safe.

Conversation with Suman revealed that despite the counselling by the MAMTA field staff during that initial interaction Suman had not accessed ART medication for her daughter in law. Nutritional support was a major issue and the team not only counseled Suman and her family on the many ways of bolstering nutritional intake, but also put her in touch with the partner organization Vihan to follow up on the BPL card so that she may avail of free ration and other government benefits to people living with HIV.

Despite this extensive counselling, correction of the Lack of Follow up status by re-enrolment in the ART centre and tie-ups with on ground staff, Suman has failed to avail of medication and has not made any effort on her own to ensure that she gains a livelihood that would be sustainable and thus provide for her family. Bitter about her own health, angry with the village administration who she feels is duty bound to provide sustenance for her family and disappointed with the on field staff for not being available at her convenience to facilitate her tasks, Suman is also lonely and isolated in the community, having alienated the few well-wishers who had stepped up to help her in the beginning.

The project may have raised her level of awareness and clarified the HIV reactive status of her children as being negative, but beyond that, it has not been able to energise or enthuse Suman to utilize this information and awareness to leverage the support that she had been offered both in terms of the on-field staff as well as her community members and neighbors. Her home stands dilapidated and neglected, much as her own appearance bespeaks. She acknowledges the advantages of the program in the village and the providential health camp that re-established her ART linkage, but is unable to find it within herself to move beyond feeling unfairly done by, to being independent and focused on her personal wellbeing and that of her family. Her daughters have been transported off to their uncles to be fostered while Suman lives in her ramshackle little room with her son and younger daughter and mother-in-law, struggling to survive. One leaves feeling unsettled and uncomfortable, wondering whether interventions always lead to success or whether there are gaps we still need to address in order to ensure it.


VOICES

Male community member

“The program taught her what was wrong, but did it teach her how to go about setting things right? She is a woman, ill and alone, uneducated and loaded with responsibilities, the team should have ensured that she has received all her documents and any other help so that she could be comfortable. (A fellow community member objected to this trend of thought opining that village level interactions among people must be initiated and maintained by the people themselves and cannot be enforced or facilitated by those who have come in from outside the system even though they may have the best intentions.)”

Suman’s neighbor

“We are willing to help if she herself is inclined to make part of the effort. It is very difficult to help someone who expects to have everything done for her. Her children are unfed and un-disciplined and yet when we try and help them, more often than not she objects vehemently. We can sympathize with the trauma she must be dealing with on a daily basis due to this unfortunate state that her husband unsuspectingly led her into, but how does that make all of us co-conspirators to make her unhappy?”
A winding road leads to a sunny little village where one is greeted with gentle hospitality and welcomed into the close little room that is proudly announced as ‘the place where our gender Resource Centre meetings were held’. The room has a feeling of lots of light though the only source is the low slung doorway facing the village temple across the lane. Sitting there waiting for the team members to arrive, one understands why it would lead to successful discussions and prompt open opinions—the seeming isolation teamed with the palpable brightness that seemed to permeate the atmosphere were ideal for new thoughts and ideas to be aired.

The village of Nauwa in the Karchana block of Allahabad has been one of the strongest bastions of the programme Meri Life Meri Choice. The Gender Resource Centre was set up in the village with the intent of energising the adolescent youth, both male and female and engaging them in the curriculum leading towards change—both individual and within the social communities where they functioned. The local coordinator approached Mamta Kushwaha and upon her acceptance, the GRC was formed. The task was not easy in the conservative atmosphere of the village, many girls being denied the permission to join the group on account of misapprehensions about what society would say. The young peer mentor persisted, helped along a great deal by her mother who espoused the cause and went along with Mamta to household after household, allaying fears and creating space for change in attitude.

The resource centre flourished and the project curriculum was rolled out to a degree of enthusiasm and excitement. In a society where even open interaction or interchange of conversation between boys and girls, men and women was viewed with suspicion, the discussion on health and hygiene including menstrual habits and issues was unthinkable. The discussions progressing into the realm of HIV and the causes and methods of prevention gradually opened up the group into an understanding of what was pertinent to their lives and how they may best share the knowledge they had gained. For a large number of the participants, such discussions and the topics that were part of the curriculum, were totally taboo in their home and larger social environment. This made the interaction as interesting as it was difficult.

The GRC discussions flourished under the guidance of the peer mentor, leading to awareness of several other aspects of gender perception and the participants sought more from the group. In interactions with the partner organisation Lok Smriti Sewa Sansthan, the girls explored the various options available to them for livelihood activity. One of the activities that received the approval of all the participants was that of a training course in sewing and stitching. The need for assigning an additional resource for the training did not arise as Sonali Kushwaha of the same group offered to share her knowledge of the skill and the centre was able to take on a new role. Administrative support and material was provided by the LSSS in the form of a nominal honorarium to the instructor and ample supply of sewing material including a sewing machine.

Two groups of ten members each were formed—one each of young adolescent girls and young married women and a training period of two months commenced. The beneficiaries also paid a token amount of rupees ten each to the instructor for her time and expertise, thus making even the training...
The training initiative proved to be an extremely fruitful one and several of the participants have found a source of livelihood in the skill of stitching and sewing and are currently running their own small centres of training in various parts of the village, generating income for themselves and providing several others with the means to do so. The busy sound of sewing machines still rings in the quiet lanes of the village.

The GRC may have wound up on the completion of the implementation period, but the enthusiasm of those who were a part of it continues. The discussions that had taken place in the group during the intervention have left a lasting impression. The girls, though they no longer discuss it among themselves, have retained the information and are aware that they will find it useful in the years to come. The highpoint of the interaction for them has been the high level of information inflow and they intend to keep it alive within themselves at least. As one walks away, there is a feeling of satisfaction in the knowledge that the spirit of Meri Life Meri Choice lives on here and will continue to do so, long after the project has closed and moved on.

**VOICES**

**Shivlakhan Kushwaha: Father to Sonali**

“I have always wanted my children to live a better life than I did. I didn't get to study enough and my wife is almost unlettered. I have ensured that my daughters are educated and able to do something with their lives. When the MLMC team came to the village, I made some enquiries about what they were about to do and found that I wanted my daughters to be a part of this and immediately encouraged them to become members. I also spoke to the fathers of the other children in that age group - some listened, some didn’t, but I felt it was my duty to ensure that the message at least was spread. I would welcome more such interventions and assure you, my involvement would be no less than it was this time.”

**Sunil Kushwaha: Brother to Mamta**

“My father died early, my mother has been everything to us. I have seen how she has struggled and brought us up, making sure we had the right education and opportunities. She was the first matriculate in the village and would have been a qualified health service provider if my father’s untimely death and the ways of society had not stopped her from that goal. She was and remains an inspiration and when she said...”
that my sister should join as the Peer Mentor for adolescent girls, I was immediately interested in the project. When the opportunity came for me to join as Peer Mentor for the boys I welcomed it and did my best to ensure that this initiative of the organisation that had come to help us was not wasted. I still engage with the boys of the group and would willingly do the same all over again if opportunity arises.

**Mother of Mamta and Sunil:**

“My life has been one of various obstacles and opportunities, usually mixed up in the wrong order. I have been thwarted as a woman, but I have never allowed that to happen to my daughter or my son for that matter. When I understood the purpose of the GRC, I was insistent that my daughter take on the responsibility because opportunities to make a difference don't come by too often. When my son also joined, I was very happy. I myself have gone from door to door engaging with the parents and trying to get them to send their daughters and to create awareness of the issues being spoken of in the meetings. This was a very welcome and wonderful interaction that enriched our children and influenced all of us.

**Sonali Kushwaha: Resource person, GRC member and sometime Peer Mentor:**

“I was in my Inter year when the project began and, encouraged by my father I joined along with my sister. The issues they brought up and discussed with us seemed so relevant and right that soon I was completely engrossed and ensured I never missed a day of meeting. When the clamour for vocational education began, I was more than happy to step in and share my skills for the benefit of those who needed my help. I know it transformed my life because even though I am now married and live in Chitrakoot, the learning I received here, both as a mentor and as a member, I have carried with me and am trying to create my own group of adolescents whom I may speak to of these issues and train in the art of stitching and tailoring. Meri Life Meri Choice indeed offered me the unique opportunity to live life the way I want to.”
Durga was a young girl with dreams of her own—the dream of a life that held joy and peace and love. A hope of respect and understanding in a home that was built by two people who cared for each other and wanted to spend the rest of their lives together, forever. Unfortunately for Durga however, this was not to be. Married off at eighteen to a man who treated her ill not only emotionally but also compounded that many times with physical abuse and mental torture, her dream of a home of love and harmony lay shattered around her and the future looked bleak and dark with not a single ray of hope. Her education had been stopped after she passed out of school, she had no additional commercially viable skills that could afford her employment and thereby gain independence and she was destitute. Trapped in a world that was governed by the whims and fancies of an abusive husband who was also a habitual drinker, it seemed Durga would have to resign herself to her fate as many before her have done.

For Durga however, this was not going to be the final word on her story. Having lost her mother at a very early age, Durga had been brought up by a quiet yet immensely strong woman—her paternal aunt whom she calls Ammaji, and her equally stolid father. Ammaji decided that her unhappy daughter should come home to ponder upon and decide the course of her life in view of the behavior she was being subjected to, and so it was that when the program Meri Life Meri Choice entered their village Singhpur in the Nagaud block, Satna district, Durga was at home. Ammaji had spoken to the community worker and asked him to let her know if there ever arose an opportunity for her child to be a part of a program or project that would help to keep her occupied and alleviate her pain to a certain extent.

The MLMC project came as the catalyst for change in Durga’s life. Having passed the rudimentary tests required to qualify as a peer mentor, this hesitant and broken young woman joined the program to heal herself and lead the initiative to the best of her ability. In the trainings for the peer mentor, Durga realized there were several aspects to her life that she could address and had a right to. The sessions on gender and violence and those on communication and self confidence influenced her greatly and she spoke of wanting to change the course of her own life to her Ammaji.

Her father and Ammaji unhesitatingly offered to support whatever decision she took and Durga applied for a divorce from her husband. She also resolved to continue her education and enrolled herself into college in order to pursue a degree course in Hindi. With the role of peer mentor molding and building her self confidence on a daily basis, she realized the folly of being unskilled and unemployable and also enrolled in a post graduate diploma course in computers, thus ensuring a livelihood.

The program required her to step out and meet new people and the recruitment drive was a lesson in itself. Slowly Durga blossomed and true to her name, found the strength within herself to overcome the evil of her circumstances and move ahead with confidence. Her personality bloomed into one of purposeful and focused energy and she made such an outstanding success of her GRC that she was soon being considered for the post of community worker. From the moment that Durga was offered the post and gladly accepted the honor, there was no looking back.
Entering new villages and leading a team of a dozen or so peer mentors was a task the old Durga could not even have imagined herself doing, but for the new self confident and content Durga, the task was a joy to perform. Recruiting people for the GRC membership in villages that she had no influence or recognition in was a tough challenge, but her perseverance and the trainings that she kept receiving through the program bolstered her courage and she swung into action. Soon the new GRCs were buzzing with members and activity and effectively changing lives in different measure for each participant.

Durga used the story of her own life to inspire and motivate her team of peer mentors, teaching them the transformative power of information, awareness, self confidence and communication skills. She cited examples from within her own experience and placing herself at the centre as the outcome of such struggle, earned the respect of her colleagues and the communities she was currently functioning in. The program gained resounding success under her stewardship and the lessons carved from the content of the curriculum, etched forever in the lives of the participants, especially Durga.

Today twenty five year old Durga stands firm and committed to the cause of development and gender equality. Awaiting the sanction of her divorce, she is poised to enter her second marriage with a man who understands her needs and shares her dreams, with the blessings of Ammaji and her father. The timid young woman who suffered ignominy in silence has given way to a young woman who knows her worth, for whom education has opened several more doors and who has transformed in to a force to be reckoned with, determined to carry her knowledge to every corner of whichever world she lives in. She is still in touch with her peer mentors and occasionally touches upon the subject content of the program with them so as to keep the discussion alive and relevant.

As one drives away from the smiling young woman and her rock solid father standing beside her, a feeling of contentment washes over one in the knowledge that a life of despair was averted and the sprigs of hope planted on fertile ground that now promises to reap rich harvest not only for herself, but for all those whom she comes in contact with. The legend has been built, now the story will continue to unfold-page upon fascinating page.

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**VOICES**

Ammaji-Durga’s aunt

“When Durga came home at my behest, I did not know what we were going to do to set her life right. And then came the MLMC program that gave her knowledge, confidence and focus and her life changed of its own accord.”
Durga’s father:

“I did not care for what society might say-this was my daughter and her happiness was my first concern. I did not interfere in her engagement with the MLMC program because it kept her occupied and when I learnt of the program content, I was even more delighted to let her continue her participation because I knew the opportunity to deal with and discuss such issues could only bring about positive change-and that is what happened.”
A programme is usually as successful as its reach. The design, the curriculum, the larger vision, the purpose—all of these are subsequent and subject to the implementation on the ground, where actual numbers and their ready participation count. It is for this reason that the Meri Life Meri Choice project was designed to be implemented in conjunction with local partners who had a closer grasp of the pulse of the people and better networking opportunities, ensuring the programme details got delivered as they were designed, by getting a buy-in from the stakeholders.

In Naseni village of Naraini block of Banda district, this was proved true by the involvement of the Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committee (VHSNC)—one of the key elements of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), that include key members of influence in the village such as the Gram Pradhan, the ANM, AWW, ASHA saheli and other members who were revered and respected by the village inhabitants.

The project inception saw the community worker and other project members sit with the committee and explain to them the contours of the programme so that they may understand what the programme dealt with and what changes it sought to bring about amongst the adolescent youth and the young wives and men of the village. This set the context for the stakeholders and they immediately pledged their support to ensure the sustainability of the programme in the village. One of the significant fallouts of this collaborative agreement was the painting of the programme poster in various prominent places across the village using funds from the committee rather than burdening programme funds, thereby enabling other activities to take place.

The committee also provided the space for the GRC to be conducted, thereby placing the seal of approval on the intervention, something that is of great value and weightage in a village of mixed population with a majority of Muslim inhabitants. The programme commenced and saw the villagers participate in moderate numbers but willingly.

The roll out wasn’t that easy however, in terms of getting the actual numbers together for the groups. The intervention in the village was in the no cost extension phase of the project and the two groups of young married women and potential migrant males were difficult to populate. The reasons were many—the women had a great deal of work to do that took precedence over attending meetings that, while approved by the village elders, may not have made complete sense to the household elders. The men were migrant and would want their womenfolk at home when they returned, making attendance an issue. Rigid norms on health and hygiene held by the majority population played havoc with the basic health services that they needed to access such as vaccination for children and iron and folic acid tablets for pregnant women. Even the peer mentor herself found it impossible to vaccinate her child till the NRHM did its periodic drive, enforcing the vaccination, even in the face of severe opposition from the maternal grandfather.

The young men’s group did not have it any easier. The ANM introduced the programme and the peer mentor was intrigued enough to want to set up the group as soon as possible. The members however, though about twenty to twenty five got together initially, did not seem to take the group interactions
serious. Perhaps an inherent discomfort with group discussions and a need to maintain individual reticence was at fault, but whatever the cause, the group was never the solid space of discussion and information sharing that it should have been. The interesting thing however, was that though the boys were unwilling to engage as a group, a large number of them approached the peer mentor individually and personally, to clarify doubts, ask questions, request further information and even seek to be provided with condoms so that they may protect themselves and those they were in relationships with, as learnt from these interactions.

The posters still adorn some of the walls, but the village committee has changed, the boys have moved on to jobs outside the village, the commitment made by the elders at that time, has not been taken up by those who subsequently stepped into the roles of village leaders and the room where the GRC meetings were held bears a forlorn look today. A little disheartened, we sought to meet some of the stakeholders from the previous committee and were told that some were out of town, some were busy and the others had moved on. Chance had us meeting the peer mentors of the two groups and one of the Anganwadi workers.

An animated conversation ensued, with the peer mentors holding forth on how the change in the village committee after the unfortunate demise of the previous pradhan who was from the Muslim community had affected development activities in the village. The conversation bemoaned the state of the village, but left us with the hope that perhaps the information sharing and the feeling of responsibility were embedded deeply enough in these stakeholders to give the project the longevity and result it required.

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**VOICES**

Saquib Khan: Peer mentor to migrant boys' group

"This village is a difficult place-no one believes anyone can work for the benefit of anyone else. That is a very tough mindset to overcome. But I was so convinced that these topics must be discussed amongst our peers and friends, I did not give up and this bore fruit. Boys who were casual walk throughs in our meetings call me up even today, now that they are elsewhere and living the life of migrant workers. They now understand the value of our discussions and I am still supplying condoms personally to those who are too hesitant to ask the ANM or ASHA worker. I have also managed to get two of the youngsters off drugs with the information I received from the programme. I am satisfied I did my best."
Raheela: Peer mentor of women’s group

“The project is over, but our group is still in touch. We made a lot of adjustments to make sure most women could attend, so they are close to each other now, having been members and learnt so much together. I try to keep us close with conversations wherever we may meet, though it is not so easy in a village like ours. But the information is very useful and the women use it constantly when their husbands return from Mumbai where most of them are, on holidays or other times. The members themselves seek more information or ask for condoms or other forms of contraception. This is a huge difference from how it used to be. This programme taught us so much.”

Urmila: Anganwadi worker

“I was part of the first meeting and immediately felt that the project would be good for the village and maybe even make my work easier with the committee taking proactive measures to acknowledge the programme initiatives. But things have changed since then. The current ANM and ASHA worker are not comfortable dealing with sexual needs or activity of the youth and adolescents and therefore don’t even distribute condoms etc. I think it is not my place to be moral police, but to make sure that the consequences of those actions are not so huge that it destroys the youngsters. For the first time someone was speaking of HIV and STI and I think it made a whole lot of difference to the young people and as long as I am here, should any of them approach me, I will always readily share information and provide whatever support they need.”
Isolation is evident in the long drive through narrow twisting lanes that lead to the village of Jatahra in the Meja block of Allahabad. The village itself is closely knit, with the houses in clusters, indicating the closeness that exists between the inhabitants. Amit, the young man we are to meet, is yet to arrive. In the dappled sunshine of the mid-summer day, the quiet of the village afternoon makes it easy to believe that the lives of the residents must be as quiet and relaxed as the atmosphere that surrounded us. As Amit enters however, this belief is shaken, as he walks in with a slight limp and pain evident on his face. The storm that rocked the village the previous day had uprooted the neem tree under which he had been sitting with his friends and landed awkwardly upon him—leaving him shaken and thanking his lucky stars to be alive.

It was difficult to imagine this soft spoken, apparently timid young man as a peer mentor or a person of the slightest influence in the village. The hesitant manner of his approach however, hid a strong determination as we soon discovered. Amit was not the Peer Mentor from the beginning. When the GRC was being formed in the village, he was intrigued by the fact that health related issues were being discussed among a group of young men and went along to see what it was all about. Of a quiet and retiring nature, Amit had not shared some health issues that he had been experiencing, with anyone else. The programme did not hold his interest in the beginning and, sceptical of the intervention, Amit was not keen on becoming a member. He often left the sessions halfway, making it clear that he found the content irrelevant. It seemed the GRC had lost a potential member. One moreover, who chose to dissuade other young men around him from becoming members too. This encouraged the peer mentor and the community worker to explore avenues of bringing him into the fold of the GRC membership, convinced that he would benefit from the inclusion and interaction. The peer mentor and the community worker did not give up on him and with continued persuasion and a great deal of patient waiting, they managed to enrol him to the group. A regular participation in the sessions began with this enrolment and with every new session at the GRC, Amit’s active participation increased. The group activities helped him ease himself into the routine of engaging with others around him and his comfort level with the interaction with the peer mentor and community worker increased.

During one of these interactions they realised that Amit had a health issue that was causing him considerable embarrassment amongst his peers and that was the reason for his hesitation to join the sessions or speak up. His condition had already led to ridicule among his friends and without the wherewithal to seek professional help, Amit was at a loss as to how to interact within the community to resolve the matter. The mortification of being addressed as a girl due to a penile discharge that seemed to resemble the menstruation cycle, turned him into an introvert who shunned groups and open discussions. With regular interaction with the mentor and some input from the sessions that touched upon body mapping and took the members through exercises exploring body parts and functions, Amit was able to overcome his hesitation and share his condition with the group. To his great comfort, not only was he not judged by the members, but in fact was referred to the Community Health Centre for counselling and treatment. The reference worked, Amit sought the free services of
the centre and emerged healthy and cured. This experience transformed him and he determined to do everything in his power to ensure that the messages of the curriculum discussed in the GRC reach as many as possible in his community.

By the time the peer mentor had to move on before the close of the project, Amit had carved a niche within the group so strong, that it was a natural choice to ask him to step in to run the final modules of the programme. His experience from the point of view of a mentor hardened this resolve and even after the winding up of the project, Amit has continued to hold the information he has received especially on STI/RTI/HIV as an integral part of his life. He may still be shy and diffident, hesitant to make overtures in public, but the value of what he has learnt and the information that he has gained from the resource centre meetings is not lost on him.

After the winding up of the project, Amit took up a job outside of the district, where he faced some of the situations described to him during interactions. The situations that a young man in a new city where he has no friends and family, may face, reiterated the need for such interactions to be held amongst potential migrants from the protective custody of their rural homes.

Amit now realises that his role did not stop with the winding up of Meri Life Meri Choice, but that it is an ongoing responsibility, the continuum of knowledge and information sharing, so that others may benefit as he has.

VOICES

Amit: GRC member and short time peer mentor

“The communities here are close-knit and supportive, but the do’s and don’ts are very very strong. I cannot be seen speaking with a young girl other than casually and to think of broaching such topics such as we discussed in the meetings with our mentors, is beyond imagination. I may want to share my knowledge and information, but it isn’t easy and many times not welcome. It is a responsibility I know I carry, but difficult to execute, especially for someone who is poor. All I can say is that joining the MLMC project changed my life and for that I am extremely grateful.”

Manju Devi: Asha Saheli

“The work started by MLMC has made my work so much more meaningful. Now I stop the young girls and talk to them about matters they were unwilling to discuss before this intervention. Ours is a very conservative community, so not much behavioural change is visible perhaps, but attitudinally the change is palpable.”
The sight of a slightly built young woman draped traditionally in a sari with her head covered under the helmet she wears as she speeds along on her little ‘Scooty’ through the village, is not the norm in most parts of Uttar Pradesh, but in the dusty tracks of villages across Banda district, this has become a familiar sight. Twenty eight year old Rajkanya Pande from Kurra Buzurg has created her own place in her community and the communities she works with, proving resoundingly that once the resolve is built, neither age old traditions nor restrictive societal diktats can hold back the path of independence.

Born into a family where education was the norm—her father was in government service, her mother had completed high school and all the children were studying, Rajkanya was however, a victim of strong gender biases and a heavy patriarchal atmosphere throughout her childhood. Her father disapproved of independence in girls and did his best to restrict his daughters to the house, to the extent that even opening the door to the house for guests was taboo. That task was to be undertaken by the men or by her paternal grandmother who lived with them. From this oppressively male-oriented and female repressed atmosphere, one would expect her to emerge subdued and resigned, but Rajkanya, true to her name, remained a firebrand princess at heart and carried her dreams strongly alight within herself.

Her marriage, arranged with the younger brother of her father’s friend, was the best thing that could have happened to her. This family, while deeply traditional, did not stifle the women of the house. Her mother in law was a great source of support and encouraged her to continue her studies, the first thing that Rajkanya had lost to societal pressures at home. A Masters’ degree holder in Social Work today, Rajkanya unhesitatingly lays the credit at the door of her mother in law for this distinction.

Working as a peer mentor for the Meri Life Meri Choice programme however, was not so trouble free. The offer to be one in her village was brought to her and accepted, in principle by her father-in-law and husband, once she explained the ambit of the programme. Her elder brother-in-law however, was not so easy to convince. He objected strongly to the fact that she had a number of interactions with complete strangers and needed to travel by public transport to get to the peer mentor trainings in the city. When the community worker of the area offered to take her with him when he went, the objection changed to that of decrying her habit of setting off with unfamiliar men. The allegations threatened to destroy her new-found independence and Rajkanya was almost prepared to give up her role as peer mentor. The lessons that she learnt during her training however, especially those dealing with life skills that taught her how to overcome objections and the art of negotiation, stood her in good stead and she approached her co-sister, drawing her into confidence.

The approach worked, her co-sister was enthused by the programme and influenced her husband to ease off the negative pressure on Rajkanya and allow her to continue the good work she was doing for the welfare of the society they lived in. In fact, the roles took on such significance that even the co-sister took on the role of peer mentor when it fell vacant after Rajkanya was selected as community worker on the project and had to move on. Rajkanya in the meantime, bought herself a two-wheeler, declared her intention of moving on her own, with
neither public transport nor strange men to contend
with thereby creating a memorable stir in the
neighbourhood, but firmly establishing her resolve
to keep up with the work she was firmly committed
to executing.

The support of her mother-in-law and co-sister in
garnering membership for the GRC, the confidence
that the programme itself gave her with the training
and the curriculum she had to master to disseminate
and her own brand of fiery freedom saw Rajkanya
move out of the village and take on a totally
proactive role in the development initiatives
undertaken by the partner organisation of the
MLMC project in the area.

Today, she moves freely, fearlessly—an intrepid
social worker, with a strident voice, a strong and
quick decision-making instinct and a focused
approach to where she wants to be and what she
wants to do. Yet the independence may have drawn
her away from the very society she sought to
change. Rajkanya is uncomfortable staying in the
still restrictive atmosphere of her marital home in
the role of ideal bahu, and seeks excuses to stay
away for as long and as often as she can. The quiet
lifestyle of the village irks her restless nature and she
itches to be up and about in the city, doing things,
making her life more comfortable, and achieving
accolades. An unfortunate fallout of the huge
positive change that the programme wrought in her
life, and yet, Rajkanya is undeniably carrying
forward the letter and spirit of the programme, still
coaching and mentoring young adolescent girls and
spreading the knowledge and information she had
received from the programme to as many as she
reaches in the course of her work.

VOICES

Rajkanya: Peer mentor and community worker

“The programme gave me the courage to do much more than I would have dared to otherwise. The family I
am married into has been like home to me and I could never have found the courage to defy my brother-in-law had it
not been for the role that was offered to me. I am determined to make sure that such initiatives are repeated in every
village I have access to, so that the independence I have achieved may be the reality of more girls and young women
who hold the same dreams that I did.”
Rajkanya’s sister in law

“At first I too was swayed by my husband’s apprehensions, after all this was a bahu of our family, what if it brought a stigma to our name-I have young daughters, it would affect their future. But once I understood what the programme was all about, I realised how foolish it would be to pull her out of it. This was the opportunity to try and correct some of the imbalance in our traditions and norms. In fact I was so vocal in my support for her that now my husband often complains that I pay far more attention to what she says than to him!”
Shankar was just an ordinary man with a large family who lived and worked in much the same way as every other man in the village and community did, to ensure a living for himself and his family. He would have been unremarkable as an individual but for a salient fact—Shankar was HIV positive, and this changed his standing as a member of the community in the most significant manner.

Shankar had moved to Mumbai in 1989 to seek employment and began working in a hotel there. His jobs kept changing over the next fourteen years till he returned to the village in 2003, but not before he had faced the misfortune of an accident that required blood transfusion which left him HIV positive. Shankar was unaware of his status in the beginning and therefore took no precautions when he came home on his annual visits, thereby passing it on to his wife and subsequently the son born after the HIV took over. Another son born a year later died in infancy, undoubtedly succumbing to the same virus. It was only when his health started deteriorating that Shankar was advised to undergo HIV testing and discovered his status—a shocking revelation that almost broke his spirit and sent him hurrying home to check on the health of his family. Tests revealed that while his three daughters were safe, his wife and son were not so fortunate. Shankar finally accessed ART in 2011 with his wife Anita following in 2012 and their son being put on ART the following year. They made peace with their misfortune and picked up the thread of their lives, only to be hit with the tremendous stigma of being ‘infected’ and therefore ostracized from community.

The discrimination threatened to destroy their lives. Shankar’s middle daughter left school when her father fell ill and did not attempt to rejoin, his wife stopped interacting with the women who were here source of support and sense of belonging because the stigma attached to HIV preceded her everywhere and Shankar began travelling out again to earn a livelihood. It was during this time that the Meri Life Meri Choice program entered the village. When the mandate expanded to actively include HIV positive individuals, the community worker sought to engage with Shankar and was taken aback at the vehemence with which he was cautioned against meeting with the ‘highly infectious’ family.

MLMC had six GRCs running in the village and had earned a name and reputation for the work that MAMTA was engaged in and this was an opportunity to cash in on that reputation in order to put at rest some of the misconceptions regarding HIV and its place in social interactions. When a health camp was scheduled to be conducted in the village a little while later, the project coordinator and the community worker jointly decided that their quest for someone to provide the food packets for the camp staff would end at Shankar’s door. He was given the task of procuring and distributing the lunch packets to the field workers and the medical staff on duty, who accepted and consumed the food in full view of the community, putting resoundingly to rest the apprehension that the touch or proximity of an HIV positive individual is infectious.

While Shankar, a capable and passionate orator, would have been ideal as a peer mentor, his age put him beyond the program parameters. However, the peer mentors of the area benefitted from his experience as he began to accompany them on visits to share his own story as an example to demonstrate the pitfalls of lack of information and
awareness about how to keep oneself safe. The health camp was a point of significance for Shankar and his family. The community now no longer shunned him in discrimination and fear, but encouraged their children to listen to him and his wife spoke to the women, urging them to be more aware of the possible dangers to their health and wellbeing that could so easily also be transmitted to their children as had happened with her.

The story of Shankar does not end here on a note of high success however. A visit to his quiet, modest dwelling reveals a great deal more. Shankar is in a hurry as he has to report for his duty as an attendant on the express train leaving from Satna, his wife and daughters hurrying around to set things in order for his departure and his son and grand nephew running around the house in the carefree energy of childhood. The conversation with Shankar reiterates the impact of the MLMC intervention and his own benefit from being chosen to participate in the health mela, his wife commenting rarely and the girls standing quietly observant of our interchange. It is when we get down to the discussion on lifestyle and why the daughter is not going back to school that other factors and facts emerge. His nephew, an earnest young man pursuing his final year at degree college lets it be known that Shankar has acquired the habit of alcohol consumption, threatening to disrupt his own treatment, consuming the funds that may be utilized for his daughter’s education and destroying the fragile peace his family has found.

The intervention of MLMC granted Shankar and his family an opportunity to live a normal life and that should have eased the trials that they faced. The program intervention however, could not take into account subsequent behavior of the protagonist, which led to a negation of the success achieved, leaving several questions unanswered—where does success get established in a program? How does one ensure such success has sustainability? What sort of checks and balances need to be put in place to monitor such interventions? How can programs such as the MLMC also include permanence in behavioral change?

The questions remain, and one leaves wondering how else one could have helped to optimize a resource such as Shankar, to not only further the message of the program and strengthen the safe behavior of the community, but also to strengthen his own resolve to do what is best for himself and his family so that the distinction of having overcome the trauma of disaster and stigma may not be decimated by life choices that deny the result of such success.
Shankar's nephew:

“It is not enough to bear the outward signs of being of an educated Brahmin. It needs strength of mind to exhibit behavior that is of the same standard and my uncle is unable to bring himself to that level.”

Anita: Shankar's wife

“Please tell him to now just concentrate on regaining his own health and allowing us to try and lead a normal life. How am I supposed to cope with the pressures of running this family and ensuring that my children lead a better life, while also trying to deal with his alcohol dependence and gender biased behavior towards my daughters?”

Shankar's daughter

“I gave up studying because my father was ill and there was no possibility of procuring the five hundred rupees required to pay up for my examination. Now I want to study, but my father's drinking bouts leave no money for 'extras' such as my education and he doesn't allow me to discipline my brother into studying. I am scared my brother will remain uneducated despite going to school and end up a failure, while I too would have lost my chance to study and become independent.”
PLAYING THE FIELD
WITH A DIFFERENCE

Dhera village in the Mouganj block of Rewa district is known for many reasons-some that bring it glory and others that place it in low statistical order of poverty and human rights. The political influence of several stalwarts who have moved from the area into mainstream politics and the resultant social mirroring of apparent wellbeing cannot disguise the abject poverty and social discrimination both in terms of caste and gender that is rampant in the region and in the village in equal proportions. Yet one unique feature places Dhera on a different platform – the passion for a sport that is not the foremost in the country, but certainly one that fires the imagination of the youngsters of Dhera-football.

Dhera boasts of a football club, and at the time of the rollout of the Meri Life Meri Choice program, had a secretary who was the president of the district football club too. This lent an edge to the training program that he was running in the local school, with opportunities and recognition both finding their way to Dhera. The program design of the MLMC intervention included games both indoor and outdoor and thus a volley ball reached the village. This changed the lives of several young out-of-school girls who had longed for the chance to play but had never been granted the opportunity or access to the training program for football in the village. The volley ball morphed into their football and the young ladies took to the field with gusto, blurring the lines of caste and age and educational divides.

The GRC was energized and resounded with the sound of happy chatter, the joy of playing a game together drawing the girls into a close circle of camaraderie. The lessons taught in the classroom were echoed many times in the spontaneous exchange of a well knit team on the field. The early morning training sessions from five to six-the only slot that was available to the group to be coached by Shri Mohanlal, would begin with the shrill call of the whistle that Archana the peer mentor would blow to assemble the girls and run to the neighboring ground, be filled with the sounds of shrill calls ‘idhar’, ‘pass’, ‘mujhe’, and draw to a close with tired but happy feet walking home to engage in the routine daily activities that somehow did not seem so burdensome or tedious any longer.

The team did not get built in a day however, resistance to girls going out of the house to even enroll in the GRC being very high. A village strongly divided by caste bias and a rigid sense of gender roles did not bend its rules easily to accommodate the vision of MLMC. Archana’s mother, a school teacher, the coach, Archana’s sisters and the mothers of one or two more forward-looking families worked tirelessly to convince the parents, going from house to house, talking to people, encouraging, coaxing, enthusing, till one by one a trickle began to form. The GRC course curriculum was another hurdle to be overcome and that too needed effort and explanation from the peer mentor and community worker, before discussions could be generated amongst the girls. When the football team emerged, the parents had been sensitized enough to the needs of their adolescent daughters, not to object too strenuously, but the stigma of ‘high born’ and ‘low born’ activities unfortunately placed the boisterous sport in the latter category and the struggle to maintain the team on an equal footing.
was a real and challenging effort.

The regular sessions in the classroom where they learnt about their bodies and health and safe living while also imbibing better communication skills and decision making techniques, along with the energy and enthusiasm that they shared on the field in a realm that allowed them to shed their quiet and retiring image gave the members a whole new personality, vibrant and independent. They learnt to speak up their mind and challenge age old traditions. They helped in the household chores but carved out time for their own interests as well. Several of them sought admission to school again, beginning another phase of empowerment that they had resigned themselves to in apathy.

The legacy has passed on. They girls in the village still play football, with a few of those from the school team even having had the opportunity of participating at the district and zonal level, two of them travelling to the south for an inter-zonal match, a rare treat for girls who had to seek permission to step out of the door even to access the local marketplace.

The content of the classroom studies may no longer be on everyone’s lips, but it still has a place in their knowledge banks, guiding and encouraging them at every step. The youngsters are happy to follow their elders even without the benefit of the learning atmosphere of the GRC. The parents are less obstructive, more open to the winds of change and the girls more confident and more vociferous in their decision to bring about that change. The texture of their interaction within each other, despite a few bristles that still make interactions prickly among a few, is that of a resilient and lasting fabric, its tenuous strength not compromised by caste or economic status or gender. The laughter still trips merrily, the words tumble out readily and the steps are still as sure and purposeful as they were. Dhera, one feels, is set on the path to transformation in more ways than one, as the blue jerseys of the football summer camp displayed with pride by the wearers, patently announce.

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**VOICES**

Archana’s mother:

“We did not expect the girls to become such good friends, the village does not encourage open interaction between different castes, but the MLMC program changed it all with one game.”

Sunita Rani:

“GRC member The access to the health centre and the information as to what it provides, was one of...”
Manju Kol: GRC member

“Things don’t change—not too much and not too soon, in our kind of society. But at least now I know what I want and how I am going to go about achieving those goals.”

Suman Saket: GRC member

“We can’t go and play any longer—the field was available to us as long as the coach was around, but some of us still get together and knock a ball around once in a while. Being on the team was a life changing experience for a number of us. We cannot forget it and our family members can’t ignore it.”

Preeti Rawat: GRC member

“My sister Archana maintained meticulous records of each meeting. Even now, once in a while when we get into a discussion about some similar issue, our mother brings out the book and the register and reminds us of our debates in the classroom. The lessons were for a lifetime.”

Maya Shukla: non GRC member

“My mother passed away when I was little and I have been running the family of my father and four siblings since I was ten years old. But even though I was not a member of the GRC, it is because of them that today I can participate in the summer camp football training and no matter what anyone says, I will continue to play and am determined to go back to school to complete my education.”

Mother of Saraswati-GRC member

“I am not educated, so I sent my daughter to school and she failed to clear the ninth grade and is now sitting idle at home. The GRC meetings were a wonderful opportunity for both of us to learn. I attended almost every meeting with my daughter and even now refer to information we had picked up there. Fate places means at our disposal, it is up to us to make use of those means—even though I didn’t have education, at least I still have the will to learn.”
EDUCATION AND SKILL FOR EMPOWERMENT AND INDEPENDENCE

It is but natural to find extremely conservative and highly traditional minded families in the heartlands of rural India, especially in Uttar Pradesh with its strong caste based society. What is surprising though, is the existence, side by side, of a large number of young women who have been allowed to pursue their education to high school, undergraduate and even post graduate levels. Herein lies the strength of rural India—the capacity to harness this group of young women and make them the harbingers of change in society.

Twenty five year old Kavita is a soft spoken, quiet girl hailing from the village of Garaul in the Kamasin block of Banda district. Her demeanour is deferential and one is immediately attracted by her gentle manner of speech and personal appearance. Her story is not so different from that of her peers in the area, if the manner of upbringing and her childhood and adolescent youth are taken into account. She lived a life governed by social restrictions, was not allowed to venture anywhere without the protection of her brother, though he was younger to her and did not know what it was to have even casual conversation with members of the opposite sex, especially with those of her own age. Her education, while liberal in access, did not afford her the freedom to move around on her own.

In fact it failed to even give her the self confidence that a Master’s degree in any subject, especially one in a language such as Sanskrit should bestow upon the degree holder. It was in such a situation and to such an individual, in her marital home, that the offer of becoming a peer mentor for the Meri Life Meri Choice programme was made.

Her marital home members were not overly keen to allow Kavita to venture out on her own as the programme required her to do and there was mild resistance from them in the first instance. The Community worker Krishna Vijay Singh however, did not lose track of his goal of enrolling her. He spoke not only to her in-laws, but also to her parents in the neighbouring Berrav panchayat, apprising them of the broad format of the programme and emphasising on the need for young women such as Kavita to take active part in leading discussions on the programme issues. His perseverance and persistence bore fruit and Kavita joined the group of peer mentors leading the MLMC programme in the area.

Handling the community in the village of her marital home was not an easy task. Kavita had to retain the trappings of prevalent social norms and venture out only decorously covered in the traditional ghunghat on her head to denote she was the daughter-in-law of a respectable household. This did not deter her from discovering herself however, and she soon developed the skills required of a peer mentor, responding well to the mentor training sessions and carrying home the knowledge to implement in her own communication with her group members. With consistence and regular attendance at the mentor training meets, Kavita’s confidence level rose, turning her into an independent young woman, unafraid to venture out on her own, even to villages outside her own.

Her people skills developed as well and Kavita began to find increasingly higher rates of success in the process of recruitment of GRC members. Her centre flourished and the number of non GRC members grew consistently, witness to the success.
of her interaction with the members during the meetings. Her good work and dedicated effort soon earned her a good name and brought her to the notice of other organisations engaged in the task of development and community interventions. As the project drew to its natural close, Kavita was offered the role of Community Worker on a gender oriented project by Sarvodaya Ashram in Chitrakoot, a task she accepted and ran with quiet expertise. In the third phase of the MLMC project however, she was brought back in the role of community worker, with the responsibility of four villages –Garaul, Kharoli, Satneya and Dattaura- once again executing her role with distinction.

Time however does not stand still and Kavita moved with her husband to Delhi, where she was glad of the instructions and information received during her training days at the MLMC project, settling in to the routine of a completely new environment with understanding and far greater ease than she would have, prior to the MLMC experience. She was also able to introduce the issues to her husband, ensuring he did not fall into the trap of ignorant errors. Currently employed in a garment factory as a seamstress, Kavita is eager to change her role to that of an educationist with the addition of a BEd degree to her qualifications, firstly so that she may bring her infant daughter to live with her in Delhi and the belief that she must continue to reach out to young girls and women with information that will help them to avoid discriminatory and biased behaviour and also keep them safe.

**VOICES**

Ramprakash: Kavita’s husband

“She was a transformed person after her experience with the project. Earlier I might have had to leave her behind in the village when I left, but the confidence that she gained as a peer mentor and community worker made her an ideal companion to travel with to a new life in a new city.”

Shiv Kumar: Kavita’s father

“I have never believed that girls do not need education and have taken great pains to ensure that my daughter received the best that I could afford. I was apprehensive however, about her capacity to handle the level of confidence and independence that the role she was given demanded and am glad she proved equal to the task.”
Like any other father, Kavita's father too was naturally worried about his daughter, but he himself had ensured her education and she proved that it is the best weapon to deal with the challenges of life. She was pushed beyond her comfort level and proved herself for everyone to see.
One of the major aims of the Meri Life Meri Choice project has been the empowerment of the girls it includes in this programme. This would, it was assumed, in turn emphasise the safe behaviour propagated through the programme in order to ensure the girls are aware of their bodies, the rights they exercise and the behaviours to exhibit in order to remain healthy and safe as they transition from adolescence to youth and adulthood. One of the essential facets of such empowerment however, was the inclusion of parents, siblings and parents-in-law so that they may be sensitised to their roles as the facilitators for such a transition. This meant including parents’ meetings into the design of the programme implementation methodology.

This aspect has repeatedly borne success in the course of the MLMC project and has shown particular success in the case of Anita from Girwan village in the Mahua block of Banda district. Sixteen year old Anita joined the GRC as a non member in the beginning because she was too young. The community worker Sita Devi approached her and she joined the group out of curiosity. Born into a large family with three other sisters among her siblings, Anita was aware of the fact that her life was not completely if at all, within her own power to control. With no regular source of income, her father ran his family as best he could, often having to compromise on basic needs to meet the family expenditure. As a result, the children grew up without a great degree of confidence and sense of self-worth.

A shy and retiring young girl, Anita too was a victim of this under-confidence and refused to interact in the group initially. However, as time passed and she continued to attend regularly, she gained more confidence and began to grasp the significance of the subjects and issues being dealt with in the sessions. The sessions on safe behaviour, gender discrimination and marriage related issues in particular captured her attention and the lessons and information she gathered through the sessions made her take a new look at her own situation.

Despite being a minor, Anita knew she was to be married off soon as her elder sister had been. She had not given it particular thought as that was the norm in their society, yet the information shared in the GRC meetings gave her pause, because they addressed the issues of maternity and maternal and infant health and the repercussions of ungoverned actions in these cases. Anita was disturbed enough to speak of the things she had learnt in the meetings with her mother. Her father had already attended a parents’ meeting in the initial days when he had been brought there by the community worker to overcome his reluctance to send Anita to the GRC. Anita’s mother, though convinced by the arguments placed before her by her daughter, was initially hesitant to broach the subject with the father for fear of his reaction. Upon repeated entreaty from Anita however, she spoke of the matter and then Anita sat down with both of them to tell them the practical aspects as discussed in the sessions, apprising them of the inherent dangers of early marriage and maternity.

The confidence that Anita displayed in her conversation with them, and her quiet conviction that she was doing the right thing, impressed itself upon her father and he agreed to defer the marriage till such time as Anita herself was ready. Anita had not been enrolled in school for a while on account of parental pressure to discontinue her studies. Sita Devi came to her aid in the matter and spoke to her father, urging him to allow her to continue with her education as he had already shown progressive
thinking in delaying her marriage. The intervention worked and Anita is now re-enrolled in school.

Speaking of her GRC membership experience Anita remembers that getting the girls to enrol was always an uphill task. In her opinion the parents’ meetings helped a great deal in increasing enrolment as the parents understood the programme after those meetings and withdrew their objections o the daughters becoming members. Anita’s father too, after his initial discomfort, became an avid advocate and urged the girls in his locality to join, often speaking with the fathers of the girls where required. Anita herself remembers going from house to house speaking with her friends and their families, encouraging participation an sharing information where she felt it would make a difference.

Anita feels that her mother played a crucial role in helping the family, especially her father, come to terms with her decision and hopes to carry forward the message wherever she may go, though currently the group dies not discuss even among themselves, the issues they had learnt in so much detail during the course of the programme.

### VOICES

**Thola Devi: Anita’s mother**

“I am uneducated, all these programmes and projects are alien to me. When my daughter wanted to join, I raised no objection because I feel they must use all opportunities for learning. I am glad she went because otherwise we would have had her married and settled by now and that would have been a sad thing for her, as I now know. Getting her father to agree was the most difficult part, but he is not an unreasonable man. Once he understood the gravity of the matter, his only thought was for what was best for our child. We might never have known but for this programme.”

**Lakshmi: GRC member and Anita’s friend**

“The programme was truly useful. We never spoke about so many things even amongst our own sisters and friends, all of these issues which are so important. I learnt about AIDS and HIV, gender and discrimination, child marriage and safe behaviour. All of this will definitely be of great help in my future life. Also the girls of our community now move around with so much more freedom and confidence. This was never there earlier. If such a programme happens here again, I will definitely participate.”
EMPOWERED AND ENTHUSED

The life of a girl in rural Madhya Pradesh, is rarely hers to command. From infancy, the path she is to tread is defined, where she will study, if she will study, when she will stop studying, when she will marry, whom she will marry and, in general, the entire course of her life. Social norms within village communities are strongly defined, the do’s and don’t’s clearly enunciated and stepping outside the boundaries is a thought that occurs to few, if any.

Sonu Shivprasad Saket was no different. Born the third daughter of her parents, she knew her destiny was to contract a suitable alliance at an early age and leave the shelter of her parental home to bring them respect by being an ideal wife. Her two elder sisters had shown the way and she was soon to follow. A seventeen year old, who nurtured dreams of studying and holding her own in society, Sonu nevertheless had resigned herself to the life ordained for her, deeming it no worse than any other that she had known or seen. It was at this time that the Meri Life Meri Choice program came to their village Raura in Huzur block of Rewa.

Sonu had never ventured out of her home town on her own and given the marginalized social and economic status their family was in, the chance to do so did not occur very often. As one of the few educated young adolescent girls in the community, Sonu was a natural choice for the role of peer mentor. Having accepted the role, the first challenge was to travel to Rewa-2 kilometers away, for the peer mentor training sessions. Timidly, Sonu began the journey, with her father in the beginning, and then, as she gradually gained in confidence and independence, on her own.

This began the transformation process for Sonu as an individual. A sensitive person, she soon realized that the part that really motivated her to reach out was the information she had received on reproductive health and methods of contraception and prevention of early pregnancies amongst adolescent girls. Sonu felt very strongly that this information was essential to be passed on to all young girls for their own safety and wellbeing and when a young girl known to her discovered she was pregnant at 17, Sonu found her vocation. Fired by the knowledge she had gained in her training as peer mentor, she approached the girl and her family and counseled them into taking the best decision for the girl, setting a precedent and opening the door for further transparency at least among the group members in order to be able to support each other and themselves through difficult times.

The incident gave Sonu the energy she needed to plunge into her role of peer mentor with more enthusiasm than ever before. She worked tirelessly to bring out of school adolescent girls into the group and generate awareness among them on matters related to their own bodies, health and life skills for a better life. Exposure visits to ‘safe’ places such as Distric Hospital, the ICT Centre, the Women’s police station and others, gave both Sonu and her team members higher levels of confidence and they resolved to be more independent and self aware.

Sonu’s enthusiasm was not overlooked and when it was time to select representatives for the National Adolescent Health Consultation, she was nominated to participate and present on behalf of the program. Her greatest passion being to speak of the issues and circumstances that govern abortion, Sonu prepared a comic card on the issue and took it with her to present in the national forum. The presentation and Sonu’s effort were greatly
Sonu gained not only in terms of knowledge and networking but also in recognition and approval from the distinguished participants—experts from across the country on the subject of adolescent health. The exposure further empowered her and Sonu determined to carry forward the work she had begun as a peer mentor for a limited period, to further spheres of her life.

Shortly after the close of the program Sonu was married and moved out to peri-urban Rewa. Here too she has begun her own version of the GRC with a few of the young girls in and around the locality where she lives, including her own adolescent sisters-in-law. She never misses an opportunity to speak to young girls and wives about the pitfalls of ignorance about one’s own body and the consequences of that ignorance. In the short while that Sonu has been in Rewa, she has already brought about a wave of awareness about adolescent health issues and means of keeping oneself safe and healthy.

The Sonu of today is a far cry from the Sonu who took her first timid steps into the MLMC program as a peer mentor. She is a confident young woman, recognized and acclaimed for her strength of purpose and focus. Sonu may now no longer be harboring her dream of being an engineer someday, but this is not because she has failed in achieving the dream, but because she has found another dream that gives her greater satisfaction and joy—that of building a better society than the one she was brought up in.

VOICES

Sonu Saket: Peer mentor

“Had my friend not become pregnant at that young age and had I not been in the position of being her confidant and in possession of information that saved her future, I would never have been who I am today—and this is entirely due to the MLMC program. My mother was my support once I stepped out, sending my brother and sisters out to gather participants for membership in my group. She is my catalyst number two.”
Often the sins of the fathers are not just visited on the sons, but on the daughters and their mothers too. Badriprasad Choudhary was one such father and the tale he left behind has many twists, all of them deeper into the coils of despair.

MAMTA and its partner organization Anupama Educational Society, conducted health camps as part of the migrant group intervention in phase three of the project Meri Life Meri Choice. In one such camp, it was brought to their notice that a young orphaned girl, Neelam, had been found to be reactive upon being tested for HIV. The team then spoke with Neelam and decided to send her for further testing to Satna, to be followed by ART linking in Rewa.

Neelam’s story was like a hundred stories before her’s. Her parents worked as migrant laborers in Surat, where her father contracted AIDS. He succumbed to the disease, but not before he had transmitted it to his wife and three daughters, none of whom were aware of their status. The mother passed away a couple of years ago, after the family had moved to Satna to their own village. The second sister, though untested, also passed away in her youth, it is believed succumbing to the same infection. This left Neelam and her elder sister in the small modest two room hut in the village.

Once Neelam’s status was confirmed, the elder sister seemed to lose some hold on her bearings and began a litany of complaint and ill behavior against Neelam. The sister was married and had two children, the younger of whom—a boy—passed away as an infant. The sister then abandoned her child, her husband and her marital home and came home to live for a while with Neelam. However, instead of being the source of each others’ strength in the times of trial and hardship, she continued to abuse and ill treat Neelam, several times going so far as to keep her hungry for days. Neelam’s health continued to deteriorate until one night the sister left without a word, leaving Neelam to fend for herself as best as she could.

Neelam was helpless, She had been pulled out of school after her eighth grade while they were still in Surat and had not been granted admission into the government school in Kunwa. With no special skills and a debilitated health condition that required special care, she was destitute. The tests confirmed her status, but due to an error in her PID, she could not access the ART centre close to her home. The entire process was brought to a standstill because Neelam was a minor and needed the consent of the guardian before the tests could be conducted upon her. The MAMTA team stepped in again and under guidance of the DD CST at MPSACs, got the sarpanch of the village to stand in as guardian and complete the process.
The issue of her sustenance still remained unresolved. How was a young, unwell, uneducated orphan girl going to live by herself with no support and no livelihood? It was discovered that the sarpanch had offered to support the girl in terms of basic needs in exchange for some minor tasks to be executed at his behest. The neighbours stepped in, some out of morbid curiosity and others with the genuine offer of help. A distant aunt with daughters the age of Neelam, voluntarily kept a look out for her welfare.

The biggest support was Kalpana, a young girl a couple of years her senior, who volunteered to accompany Neelam on her hospital trips and in general step into the role of elder sister so rudely vacated by her own sibling. The strange ways of village social politics did not let that friendship flower and soon caused a rift between the two, implying various unsavory tales about both and driving a wedge between them. Neelam was on her own again.

The timid child who came out to greet us wrenched at the heart strings. She was so unprotected and innocent, the first instinct was to gather her up and say that everything would be alright. As the tale of her woes poured itself out of her broken spirit, it became evident that the positive effect of the interventions immediately after the health camp had worn off. An open secret seemed to be that Neelam’s mother had left her some money and one couldn’t help but wonder if that was the reason for the solicitous behavior of those hovering around her.

She offered the information that she worked as a daily wage laborer when there was work and other times helped in the sarpanch’s house, receiving his benefaction in return. The team took her through a quick understanding of safe places and safe behavior so that she may be protected and less vulnerable and also how to make the most of her earnings through financial management. This alone however was not enough.

Kalpana was called and reconciliation affected between the two, thereby re-establishing a support system of value. It was decided that Neelam would return to school to pursue her studies for which the sarpanch would verify her identification and vouch for her resident status in the village, enabling her readmission into school. It was also decided that her elder sister would be approached and asked to undergo testing for HIV status as that was the most likely cause for her son’s early demise and try and affect repatriation to her maternal home to live with Neelam.

The diffident smile comes through every so often, even beneath dewy eyes and one leaves feeling helpless, unsure whether enough has been done, whether the child is indeed safe for a while or whether she is equipped to handle the challenge that is her life. But she stands quietly at her door and bids goodbye, happy to have found her friend, trusting her neighbors mean well and placing her faith in the residual team for the rehabilitation to begin—with school being the first step.
Kalpana: Neelam’s friend

“They taunted me with vile accusations, saying I was accompanying her for my personal reasons. I am only glad that the health camp took place here and she could be tested. It is best to know so that one can face the truth and live with the consequences.”

Neelam’s distant aunt

“I worry about her all the time. I have daughters her age and shudder at the thought of her being alone. How does one ensure she is not exploited? Thank God the program team taught her some of the basics of life skills and other pertinent issues. It may not be much, but it is her only armor against the world.”
Waiting in the car by the roadside, as the young man busily made phone calls to assemble the other young men who had scattered due to the delay in our arrival, one could not but be impressed by the persuasive capacity of Virendra Kumar, Community worker in Hardua village of Sirmour block in Rewa. Tirelessly he coaxed and cajoled and requested and compromised with the boys, trying to gather as many as he could together in order to provide as comprehensive a feedback on the program as possible from the participant members of the GRC in the village, set up for the rollout of the Meri Life Meri Choice program for young adolescent girls and boys.

The garage-like space, piled high in the corner with the latest load of the onion crop that seemed to be plentiful, also provided a clue to the restlessness of the youngsters-they were required in the field, it was harvest time and they had the willing hands that were required. One by one they trickled in, six young men, all erstwhile members, pulling out chairs, clearing space, setting pieces of paper handy to be used as hand fans to combat the desultory afternoon warmth, barely broken by a breath of a breeze-clearly demonstrating the ease of familiarity, for this little space was where the GRC used to be held.

We settle down to a discussion. The first point that comes to light is that these were young men who had voluntarily joined the group, though they might have needed encouragement and cajolument to do so initially. The program recall was immediate and led to a round of shared remembered moments among the bys themselves and with their peer mentor. The enthusiasm was infectious - this was not a group that had been forced together, but one that enjoyed being together, Virendra still popular among them as a leader and the intervening months melted away in the easy chatter before we began discussions on the program.

The motivation to join was the first point of discussion-why did each one of them choose to join? The answers boiled down to three basic reasons amongst the many that the boys came up with- sheer curiosity about the program and what it entailed, a reason and means of interacting with young men of their own age who may or may not have been in their immediate circle prior to that and a genuine interest in expanding their knowledge base to include new information and activities that would be enablers for a better future. A discussion on the possibilities of the future triggers a debate on whether just the gathering and absorbing of information, no matter how useful and pertinent, is a counter to the lack of formal education, and whether such programs should also be oriented towards encouraging purely educational pursuit as a means of a better life.

Most of the young men had not crossed the golden Rubicon of class ten-the threshold of secondary education, with the majority having failed to clear the first formal testing of their educational levels in class nine. The system of no examination till the end of middle school was hotly discussed, once again emphasizing the ease of cohesiveness in the group-something they were patently used to, and comfortable with. When the subject turned to the inherent gender biases prevalent in their society, the
boys unhesitatingly agreed that though girls invariably out-performed the boys, in general, they were rarely granted unlimited access to educational facilities, merely because they were girls. The two boys who did have sisters though, proudly announced that one had two sisters that had completed their graduation and were happily married and settled down, while the other’s sister was still in middle school but determined to become doctor and encouraged to hold on to those dreams by all members of the family.

The content that dealt with the health and security of adolescent youth was what the members seem to have resonated with the most. Each one of them remembered a different aspect or a different piece of information that they had received and without prompting, came up with the possible advantages of such information and awareness and its relevance to youth both male and female, in their age group. A couple of them agreed that while they may not have had to utilize the information as yet, undoubtedly, as they grew older and assumed the roles of husband and father and perhaps employee, they would need to recall the core lessons of those sessions, and moderate their own actions and activities in accordance with them.

The impact of such a program, most of them said, is that it gives the participants some information and issues to deal with that they have not so far been exposed to and therefore did not even know were relevant to their lives in any manner. Many of them had no idea of how the adolescent body experiences changes and suddenly found themselves understanding emotions and experiences that they had not even consciously realized they were undergoing. The information on AIDS and HIV and the related information on STI/RTI was equally new yet pertinent they felt. Accepting that in all probability they would move out of the village in search of employment, they also acknowledged that this information and awareness should be a part of the knowledge base of all young men in their position.

Time constraints have put an end to their endless debates and discussions, just as the end of the program has signaled an end to their regular meetings, but the minds still teem with thoughts prompted by those debates and lessons. The life-skill sessions may not be fresh in their recall but the ease with which they put forth their views, the confidence with which they defend their opinion, the dexterity with which they counter and handle objections and the range of topics and issues that holds their interest deeply enough to be debated upon, speaks volumes for the impact of the sessions they have undergone during the GRC interactions of the MLMC program.

The program may have wound up and the boys may no longer be so closely in touch, they may not even have taken on the trickle-down responsibility of disseminating the knowledge and information to others who had not had the fortune of participating in the learning process with them, but that these young men would exhibit restraint and responsibility, combat juvenile recklessness with their own understanding and information and at least within their own families, counter gender biases, seems to be a conviction that they all exude. Satisfied, one leaves the smiling young men whose very stance announces their independence and self-confidence, wishing them well and hoping fervently that the change envisaged for the community may be wrought by them as the means.
Bablu Saket: GRC member

“There is not a great deal we can do on our own here, our access is limited, but with programs like this, we can explore and expand our knowledge base. This is what really made the program special for me.”

Sujit Kumar Chowdhary: GRC Member

“I know that I must study and make something of myself. I have cleared all my papers in the first attempt. The program speaks about self improvement and I think if I can take care of that part, the other parts will fall into place.”

Tribhuvan Saket: GRC Member

“There are very few opportunities for us here in the village- we will have to move out. But thankfully we now have some information and are more aware of the pitfalls that can await us, we will definitely be careful in those situations.”

Dhiru Saket: GRC Member

“I thoroughly enjoyed the interaction we had with the group. Many of them were strangers to us-this is a big village and we may not know everyone. The MLMC program gave us the opportunity to know new people. The games were fun too.”

Dhirendra Kumar Barman: GRC Member

“For the first time I realized the way girls were treated was different from the way they were supposed to be treated. I had always accepted things as they were because that is what I had seen traditionally. Those gender sessions changed my perception totally.”

Bishukant Chaudhary: GRC Member

“There are many things and issues that we do not discuss even with our families and hesitate to speak of with our friends. The GRC sessions made sure we had the space and the comfort not to be inhibited about anything and as a result we all gained so much in terms of knowledge.”

Tulsidas Khushwaha: Community Worker

“I took the life-skills sessions for them and I believe in it so absolutely, that it is my greatest endeavor to continue sharing the essence of those sessions with youngsters everywhere. Trust me, the change will be remarkable, the curriculum is designed with such understanding of the audience.”
The small village gives one little cause to suspect that there may be lives in turmoil living here. The quiet expanse of fields, the welcoming shadows of the lanes, the modest hutments tucked back behind cattle-populated courtyards leaves only a sense of restfulness and self-sufficiency. Yet, this little hamlet has stories to tell, of courage and despair and fortitude in the face of misfortune.

The young woman who steps forward to greet us is not a picture of abject despair, nor is her attitude that of a grieving woman, upset and wronged. Instead we are greeted with a quick bright smile and immediate hospitality—a place to sit, the offer of water and the ready warmth of conversation. The three men on a hemp cot at a little distance are as much a part of the group as Parul, the lady host is. They are her brothers-in-law, an integral part of her life and that of her children.

Her story unfolds, leaving one with a sense of helpless wonderment at how lives are made and wrecked with a few careless gestures. Her husband, dissatisfied with the livelihood opportunities in the village, had moved to Mumbai to his elder brother’s house in search of better employment. Perhaps in the lonesomeness of a new city, so far from his wife and family and the pressures of making a living that would make the move viable, he was careless with his health and contracted HIV. Unaware, he battled ill health and discomfort on his own for a while, till he was forced to seek institutional help, where mandatory tests disclosed his positive status. The news shattered him and broke his resolve to live, leading him on the downhill emotional path towards suicide.

An attempt left him grievously hurt and unwell and forced him to come home, where he was too unsure of the repercussions to speak of his condition, letting his family believe he had been in an accident. In a health camp organised under the Meri Life Meri Choice programme, Parul came to know about the symptoms of HIV and spoke to the peer mentor of her husband, his ailment and her apprehension that he was positive. Counselling by the peer mentor, she approached her husband and asked him directly regarding his status and he told her about his traumatic experience.

Cautioned by the information she had received, Parul immediately took preventive measures in her relationship with her husband and, justifiably disturbed at his deception, chose to keep the children—two girls and a boy, away from his direct physical influence. She availed of the testing facilities for herself and her children and was relieved to find that they all tested negative. For Parul now, it is a daily struggle to keep the illusion of her marriage alive, get her husband back onto ART and somehow keep the household afloat.

Unlettered and unskilled in formal livelihood streams, Parul took great interest in the curriculum of the migrant women’s GRC, particularly on the financial literacy aspects and has decided to use her skill in knitting and sewing judiciously, making sure that there is a steady flow of income into the family and her children’s education and welfare are not compromised. The family members have been a source of support, sympathising with the difficult situation that Parul finds herself in. Her brothers-in-law are unhesitating in their praise of her exemplary behaviour in the face of such odds and uniformly condemn the attitude and actions of their brother who placed his entire family a peril with his careless and irresponsible behaviour.

The programme intervention with the young women with migrant husbands helped Parul...
understand her financial position as well as the dimensions of health and wellbeing for herself and her family, giving her the confidence to shoulder the responsibility and take on a decision making role. The taciturn nature of her husband is not easy to handle and the village community gives him a wide berth, preferring to avoid interaction rather than to seek it with the glowering individual seated outside his isolated room. The quick, bright smile, the eager, rushed speech, the steely determination to do what is best for the children and the engaging acceptance of her own illiteracy all add up to a remarkable young woman who has made her peace with her lot and built her capacity to meet the challenges life has thrown her.

VOICES

Parul: Non GRC member. Spouse of HIV positive migrant husband

"I do not have a great deal of choice—I must accept my fate. But I am determined not to let this misfortune cast a shadow on the future of my children. They shall be educated and skilled so that they may lead lives of honour and ease and be able to gather and process information that may affect their lives. I do not want them to be unaware and vulnerable as I have been. I hope programmes and projects like the MLMC continue reaching out to the under privileged so that other women may get the support and knowledge I received from here. I will now start learning the alphabet from my daughters so that I may at least be able to read and write basic things."

Parul’s brother-in-law

"When we heard about the programme, the group was already under way. Once we got to know about the programme content and the issues being discussed in the meetings, we had no objection at all to our sister-in-law attending the meetings. She has always been strong, but now she is armed with information and will lead her children in the right direction even if my brother chooses to ruin his own life. MLMC was an extremely useful intervention for our family’s welfare."
The road curves lazily, and falls off sharply on either side, with the village homes dotting the countryside on the low lying areas it passes through. A little cigarette shop holds pride of place next to the road, the only structure above the field level houses. The community worker quickly darts off to fetch Archana Prasad, erstwhile peer mentor of two villages and the wife of another peer mentor from her home in Sirsa village in the Raipur Karchuliyan block of Rewa. Soon the two women merge from the shadows of the village lanes dimly visible behind the huts in front and we settle down in the deserted portico of a closed shop, to chat.

Twenty two year old Archana, currently pursuing her final year of graduation, is a quiet young woman but as one begins to speak with her and draw her out, her enthusiasm for the project she has been associated with closely, pours out. The MLMC program had been conducted in her own village, Bhauri, as well, before her marriage. Archana had taken on the role of peer mentor to the adolescent girls there and learnt a great deal to bolster her own confidence and knowledge. The program was a success and Archana determined to utilize her learning whenever opportunity presented itself to her.

The chance came sooner than she had envisaged. Upon marrying Umesh Sahu and moving to Sirsa, she was delighted to learn that the Meri Life Meri Choice project had extended its duration to include migrant wives and men and that a program was to be run in this village as well. When the quest for peer mentors began, Archana eagerly stepped forward, quoting her previous experience and her keen desire to continue with that experience as arguments in favor of her candidature and succeeded in securing the role. The transition from being the at-home daughter-in-law to a change-maker in the community was not easy and in order to counter the objections in her marital home, Archana proposed the name of Umesh as the peer mentor for the boys’ group and Umesh happily accepted the responsibility.

Both Archana and Umesh approached the program implementation with enthusiasm and with their joint presence, energized both their groups, Archana for the migrant wives and Umesh for the potential migrant males. The fact of their being husband and wife and the support that their family offered as a result, stood them in good stead and their numbers increased rapidly. The members were enthusiastic and participated whole-heartedly, bringing success and energy to the program. The sessions drew high attendance and led to many animated discussions both within the GRC and outside it.

Already familiar with the course curriculum, Archana paid particular attention to the sessions on financial literacy. Both Archana and Umesh found the sessions of great utility and interest and with the help of the community worker, took pains to understand the portions that dealt with financing models and savings related information. Both of them had dreams of establishing their own business and were eager to discover the means to do so. Finances were their biggest concern and threatened to consume their dreams of the future. At such a time, the financial module was the most opportune thing for them to have encountered.

With the facilitation of the community worker and information on how to access the relevant
Institutions, both Archana and Umesh acquired loans to begin their individual entrepreneurial initiatives. Archana used the loan to buy a sewing machine and set up her own little business, while Umesh bought an auto rickshaw and has begun to earn from that source while pursuing his BCA. Both of them have taken the advice on the savings module to heart and are easily paying off their loans through the means described in it.

Today, as we sit discussing Archana’s plans for the future, her enthusiasm for the MLMC program and her desire to participate in any such activity whenever the opportunity presents itself again and her visible excitement over being able to establish her sewing centre without having to undergo immense hardship of saving and having to do without things, the impact of the course curriculum is evident. The smiling, animated young woman, while decorously covered in the anonymity of her pallu as befits a bahu of the village, is confident, forward looking and extremely independent. Her anticipation of the financial independence that she and her husband will achieve while pursuing their studies and gaining the opportunity of a better standard of living is infectious and leaves one with the bright feeling of satisfactory success in the endeavor of bringing a lasting change at the grass roots level in the lives of the youth.
ABOUT EJAF

EJAF is a dynamic non-profit organization whose mission is to end the AIDS epidemic by ensuring everyone has the information and means to prevent infection and all people living with HIV have access to high-quality medical care and treatment. We believe AIDS can be beaten, so we raise funds for evidence-based programs and policies, and speak out with honesty and compassion about the realities of people’s lives.

Elton John created the Foundation nearly 25 years ago, in the United States in 1992 and the United Kingdom in ’93, in response to the urgent need for philanthropic support to address the global AIDS crisis and provide assistance to people living with or dying of AIDS. Through hard work and with the help of our generous friends and supporters, the two foundations together have raised more than $350 million over the past 24 years.

Today, the Foundation continues to pursue the mandate Elton set forth almost 25 years ago. Although tremendous scientific progress has been achieved in HIV prevention and treatment, universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, and health care continues to be a concern, and our mission remains the same – to fight for the dignity and well-being every person, combat stigma, prevent HIV infections, ensure universal HIV treatment for all who need it, and pressure governments to end AIDS. The U.S. foundation focuses its efforts on programs in the United States, the Americas, and the Caribbean and was recently recognized by Funders for LGBTQ Issues as the largest funder of LGBTQ health programs in the nation and by Funders Concerned About AIDS as the largest HIV funder of programs for transgender people.

For eleven consecutive years, EJAF’s U.S. foundation has been recognized as a four-star charity – the very highest rating – by Charity Navigator, indicating the Foundation consistently executes its mission in a fiscally responsible way and adheres to good governance and other best practices that promote and ensure ethical and transparent business dealings. EJAF’s strong financial health and dynamic and flexible grant-making philosophy position the organization ideally to respond quickly to medical breakthroughs and innovation, to adjust its grant-making priorities to address the needs of the ever-shifting demographics of this global epidemic, and to advocate for policies that protect and strengthen the health and rights of people affected by HIV/AIDS.
MAMTA, a movement initiated by paediatrician, Dr Sunil Mehra, began by designing interventions for the underprivileged communities in Tigri, an urban Delhi slum in 1990. Since its inception, MAMTA has embarked on initiatives focusing on building capacities, forging partnerships, creating networks and actions that advance political commitment and investment in health and rights of the marginalized.

MAMTA has promoted strategic solutions, policies and programming, research and global learning in the fields of Maternal Newborn Child Health and Nutrition, Young People’s Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights, HIV, TB and Non Communicable Diseases, with special focus on promoting rights, gender equality and equity.

Today, MAMTA mobilizes community, strengthens health systems, networks and conducts policy level advocacy in close partnership with the government and public health systems, civil societies, academic institutions, corporate sector and community at large. MAMTA also serves South and South East Asia region as a technical support in addressing health and development issues.