



# MANthan – Sanjhi Soch

“A gender equality promotion program, where men and boys take the lead to promote gender equality.”



Taking the journey of UMANG forward, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), with support from Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies, has initiated a collaborative program called Mathan to understand masculinity-based perspectives and encourage positive thinking among men, in addition to women and adolescent girls.

As part of this program, efforts are being made to challenge norms of masculinity, institutional practices, behaviour, and approaches in 12 panchayats and 30 villages in two blocks of Jamtara district. A multi-pronged approach is envisioned to create a transformative path for a continuous change process in these villages where ICRW and partner organizations are already working towards empowering adolescent girls.

**The programme aims to validate the transformation process** at both individual and group levels. The program also encourages open dialogue among men and women from all age groups and between parents and children, particularly between fathers and sons. Another focus area of the program is to provide leadership guidance to men and boys interested in volunteering, promoting gender equality, and engaging and collaborating with other key institutional community stakeholders to support positive engagement.

We undertook an extensive and systematic mapping of the various developmental issues in the rural areas of our project sites. This mapping exercise provided a blueprint or an outline of a framework on how gendered various developmental problems are and how we would collectively engage men and boys and identify their roles in synchronization with women and girls who are already involved on those issues in their respective communities.

The project has allowed us to present ideas of patriarchy, masculinity, and traditional ideals in front of the communities in new, innovative, and unique ways. This project also allows us to understand how different religions, castes, economic statuses, and other social norms are associated with gender discrimination or inequality and how they find varied and diverse expressions.

We selected nearly 50 youths from the intervention sites who willingly joined us and showed their heartiest interest in doing something for their community. We called them "Village Champion (VC)". After several rounds of interaction, training, and orientation, we shortlisted 34 Village Champions for going forward. Selecting and shortlisting of VCs are ongoing processes of the project to bring new and innovative thoughts to the project continuously.



**A couple of** exciting outcomes at this stage of our intervention with such village champions include how they have responded to the series of workshops and engaged with each other most critically, often challenging and contesting each other. There was never unanimity, but also there was never a complete disagreement on the need to promote equality. Priorities or entry points to address gender inequality were never the same for all, which was exciting.

The other exciting outcome for us has been how tangibly village champions have identified different pathways to promote gender equality in their respective communities. Most of them considered their communities' most pressing developmental needs/issues as entry points.

These Village Champions have, over the last few months, undertaken a number of activities and initiatives for their communities. They prepared their own strategies to address those issues creatively and innovatively. However, prior to finalizing the strategy, they conducted informal community-based surveys to identify the nature and magnitude of the problem and figure out what the acceptability of the intervention they are planning would be.

Seeing how they are taking several steps to create awareness and mobilize community on these issues is exciting. Some of them are also initiating collective action to demand from the panchayat to initiate a systemic response on water resource management, safety and transportation issues.

**Some early achievements** of Village Champions through their engagement with schools, governance structures (PRI), and communities include the

readmission of 12 dropout girls into schools, initiation of free tuition centres for adolescents in 5 villages, organizing community-level meetings for sensitization and providing linkages to 22 adolescents through govt schemes for skill building training programs. These process-level outcomes show an encouraging way forward for future.

To date (December 2023) these village champions have created an additional network of more than 200 youths working together to promote gender equality in their respective villages.

**The most challenging** issue we have faced or often experience is the general apathy of the community towards issues of gender equality. Maintaining a consistent dialogue with community on this issue has been challenging. Inequality and caste hierarchy is deeply entrenched within these communities. While a mass campaign on girls' education and child marriage is acceptable, a campaign that promotes overall equity and equality is challenging to navigate. Similarly, an already constrained employment and livelihood situation of our Village Champions often struggle with their own sense of insecurities and dilemmas when working on issues like equality.

We know that **structural inequalities** are deep and constitute a significant challenge for us. However, we think the snowballing of village champions into creating a larger network of such men and boys will keep up the momentum and eventually create a scale impact.



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“I was thinking earlier also that there should be equality, why should I not do household work, why should cooking or sweeping be done only by the women of the house, but this thought of “What will people say” was stopping me.

But this Manthan training opened my eyes, and when I understood that my thinking was correct, when I saw that other people thought like me, then it was as if I experienced a new courage , and all the hesitation seemed to end instantly”

– **Village Champion Aroop from Maralo village, Jamtara**

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“Earlier, also I used to sweep and cook food; the only difference is that earlier, I used to do all this secretly so that no one would see and no one would taunt me for this, and now when I do the same work I want people to look at me and say something so that I can explain to them the meaning of equality.”

- **Village Champion Kumud from Gopalpur village of Jamtara**

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