

April – May, 2020

Bringing in the Gender and Rural Perspective to Dealing with CoVid 19



SWATI's Response to the Pandemic



Society for Women's Action and
Training Initiative

2020

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We appreciate all the support provided by and the individual correspondence with **change.org**. Their platform and their involvement were vital in finding an audience for SWATI representing the voice and demands of the communities. It also helped us garner extensive support for our advocacy measures.

We want to take this opportunity to thank every **individual** who took the time to read and support our cause by signing our petitions. It helped us open communication with relevant government authorities.

The **local governance bodies** of each village – Panchayats and other health officials were extremely helpful and cooperative in the smooth execution of relief measures. From identification of recipients to successful delivery, their support cannot be appreciated enough.

We could not have achieved any of this without our diligent and dedicated **field team** working on the ground - they rose to the occasion and went above and beyond their call of duty to make this possible.

About SWATI



Society for Women's Action and Training Initiative (SWATI) is a feminist organization working towards empowerment of rural women since 1994. We have had various community initiatives in the last 25 years of our existence and have a strong grasp of the systems, functioning and issues faced in rural Gujarat; issues that are very specific in nature to the said geography and socio-economic makeup.

Introduction

The suggestions – maintain social distancing, stay-at-home and be responsible quickly turned to a full country lockdown with a notice of 4 hours by the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi on 24th of March, 2020. While a government enforced directive was of grave importance in the event of the pandemic and was taken by the government with learning from other countries, the hasty lockdown had consequences leaving a lot of people in dire straits. A complete shutdown of commerce, transport, medical aid (barring essentials) etc meant that a country of 1.3 billion had 4 hours to stock up on essentials (groceries, veggies, medicines), reach their homes in case they were working in other cities, deal with their medical requirements and basically prepare for everything for the next 21 days. While there have been debates about how this pandemic is a great leveler, but is it really?

Given the existing gender dynamics, the current situation created by COVID19 has a disproportionately higher impact of women putting them in a weaker position and hence requiring special attention and specific interventions targeted to their needs.

While all women are vulnerable, single women, the agricultural laborer, salt pan workers, marginalized castes and class women have become far more vulnerable vis a vis health/food and nutrition security, increased domestic violence, indebtedness and their overall sustenance in the long run. In the absence of targeted relief in this situation, the position of women is likely to drop even further and mitigate the progress we, as a society, have made over the years. At SWATI we focused on incorporating a gender lens to our own and the government's response to differential needs of women and girls in emergency and long-term support to combat COVID 19 pandemic.

The COVID19 virus is having starkly different effects on different groups of people. One of the most pronounced divides to emerge is regarding gender. There is an effort to focus on the gendered impact on women and girls to combat the impact of CoVid 19. Our interventions are focused on day to day ground realities of ensuring access to services and entitlements, recognising and working to mitigate the impact on women and girls, be it reproductive and sexual health, domestic violence, education, mobility or access to digital technology. Our approach to achieving these are through local governance bodies-the gram panchayats, women's collectives and youth. Strengthening of platforms such as the Gram Sabha and the social justice committees / Mahila Nyaya Panchayats is integral to this approach.

CoVid Response: At a Glance

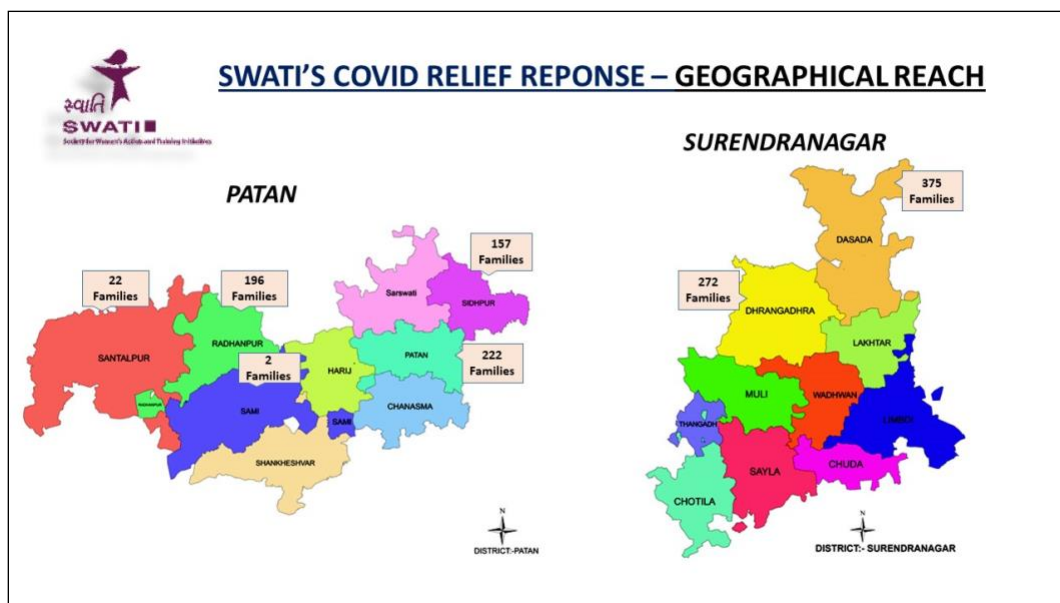


Figure 1: A total of 60 villages in two districts were reached as part of relief efforts

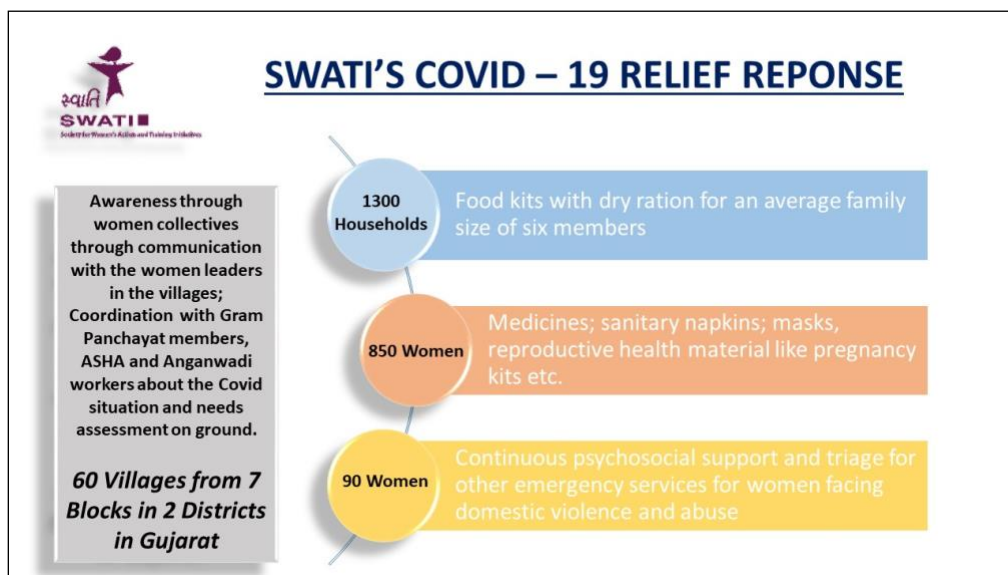


Figure 2: Various kinds of support was extended after careful needs assessment

Gendered Initiatives

Incorporating a Gender Lens: to differential needs of women and girls in emergency and long-term Support to combat COVID 19 pandemic

1. Relief Measures

SWATI extended relief to communities in two districts; Patan and Surendranagar. With the help of our field teams, we have been in constant touch with the communities on ground to monitor the situation, identify needs and pitch in wherever possible. We have been speaking to village authorities – been in touch with Gram Panchayats and the District Governance in order to identify needs, get required permissions and provide relief while also ensuring no one is put in harm's way.

Approach to relief distribution in both the locations became specific to SWATI's work focus and outreach in these districts:

Patan: Relief in Patan was focused on women survivors of Domestic Violence. They were identified with the help of the counselors of Mahila Sahayata Kendra – SWATI's woman's help cell that is operating in the district since 2016. These cells to support DV survivors have been set up in three hospitals of Patan by SWATI towards making the rural health system more responsive to VaW. The cells provide valuable insights into what works and has been instrumental in guiding our work with women. The rich data available from the cells and our counselors came in handy in reaching out to the survivors and providing relief.

Surendranagar: SWATI began its journey in 1994 from Surendranagar district of Gujarat. Very early in the journey, we envisioned the collectives to be the community-based organizations led by women drawn from the *sangha* membership. The Mahila Vikas Sangathan (women's development Union) - a collective of over 3500 women in two blocks, has an independent identity beyond SWATI and marks a stage in the fulfillment of the vision of SWATI.

Relief in this district was undertaken with the support of the federation and focused on women who lack support like single women, women with disabilities, widowed women, women with no identifying documents like Aadhar or ration card and the like.



Food Kits to Vulnerable Households

Worked with Gram Panchayats to identify most vulnerable families - focus on single women, women with disabilities, widowed women and migrant women who lacked access to entitlements.



Medical and Reproductive Care

Provided medicines, sanitary napkins, masks and reproductive health kits like pregnancy kits to 350 women.



Support to Violence Survivors

Continuous psychosocial support and triage for other emergency services for women facing domestic violence and abuse

Image 1: For more information on SWATI's relief measures and case studies from rural India of impact of CoVid on women and girls, log on to swati.org.in

Selection of recipients:

We worked with women leaders, local authorities and village governance bodies to identify:

1. Women survivors of violence who have lost their livelihood during CoVid lockdown, lack resources / documentation for accessing government relief or need other support services

2. The most vulnerable population in the villages - people with disabilities, women who have partners with disability; people who have lost their livelihood due to lockdown - especially women; old aged women and people who did not receive government ration / other entitlements due to lack of proper documents and families of migrants from other states not able to make to back home.



Image 2: SWATI Team distributing packages adhered to guidelines and social distancing norms at all times

Quantity:

Relief was carried out in two phases. Food kits with dry ration which would last 15 - 20 days for an average family size of 6 members were distributed to 1300 families.

Local Procurement:

Phase 1: In each region/block, local vendors were identified for supplying the food kit. The identification of the vendors was done after seeking quotations from a few shopkeepers and the availability of stock with them at reasonable rates. It took two to three days for the shopkeepers to arrange the required quantities of food kits in all the areas because the supply chains were severely affected during that time. All the payments were made online directly in their bank accounts.



Image 2: Local small scale farmer and chakki owner – supplied wheat flour for food kits

Phase 2: For this, we went a step further to promote small-scale business and local produce. We also wanted to look at our efforts leading to the empowerment of women farmers. To this end, we identified a local woman farmer and bought her produce to be included in the ration kit for distribution. The woman also has a small scale flour mill and provided us the wheat flour of the grains purchased from her farms. 725 kilograms of wheat flour procured from a woman farmer in Upariyala village, Dasada block, Surendranagar district for ration kits which were distributed in the block.

We identified 9 out-of-work women tailors from Dhangadra and Patdi to stitch masks. A shortage and hence need for masks was identified – local cloth shops and local female tailors were employed to fill the gap between the need and demand. Over 7,000 masks have been created locally and distributed within the community.

Method of disbursement of food kits to recipients:

- Sought permission of distribution and movement from the Government administration at the block level. The permissions from the Taluka Panchayats in Patdi and Dhangadra was relatively easier but with Patan, it involved a lot of paperwork and online forms to access passes for movement since the block was under red zone category then.

- Coordination with the Gram Panchayat before moving to each village to use the panchayat premises, ensure the genuine recipients, and social distancing for Surendranagar district.
- In Radhanpur, Siddhpur, and Dharpur blocks of Patan, the government ASHA worker was supporting to ensure the selection of common place for distribution and maintaining social distancing.
- The field team, implementing the distribution was carefully selected to avoid older members, pregnant women and people with co-morbidities. The operations were carried out in coordination with the central team.
- The team at the field was constantly monitored by the central team to assure safety and following of safety norms related to pandemic. Before conducting the relief operation each team member was oriented for the precautionary measures like wearing a face mask, wear clothes that cover the whole body, keep drinking water along, carry sanitizer, ensure social distancing everywhere while distribution.
- A private vehicle was hired for the team visiting these villages with food kits and complete precautions about its sanitization and driver's safety were ensured.
- Government guidelines and rules were adhered to at all times during the relief operations.

2. Advocacy to applying a gender lens

Policy formulation in countering the impact of COVID19 on women, girls and the queer community:

Women are in a position of heightened vulnerability due to CoVid and its consequential lockdown. SWATI formulated appeals to bring attention to and garner support for the needs of women since they are the most vulnerable and neglected in the events of crisis. Within the first week of the lockdown in March, SWATI took the lead in drawing attention of the state government in Gujarat to the situation on ground in rural areas and the issues already being faced by the women in overwhelmingly unorganized/ informal rural sector. The letter of recommendations signed by 22 civil society organisations and prominent individuals listed specific recommendations that ought to be part of the policies formulated to address the COVID19. The recommendations for meeting women's special needs related to sexual and reproductive health, household and care work, paid work, prevention of domestic violence, protection for frontline health workers and recognition of the vulnerability of queer communities in a pandemic. The recommendations were sent to all relevant state departments and was shared with the print media and with online platforms:

<http://counterview.org/2020/04/06/impact-of-virus-on-women-girls-requires-special-attention-civil-society-intervention-needed/>

Garnering civil society support to activate the government:

During COVID19, evidence from countries where a lockdown was/is imposed indicates that movement restrictions aimed to contain the spread of the virus is also making violence at home more frequent and severe. In India too evidence from the ground as well as that available with the National Commission for women indicated that the DV/ IPV is doubled.

SWATI ran two online petitions on change.org garnering widespread public support by starting the following online petitions, appealing to the Prime Minister, the minister of the Department of Women and Child Development (DW&CD) and National Commission for Women (NCW) to take appropriate action to prevent domestic violence.

a) Stop Domestic Violence #COVID19: Keep violence prevention services fully operational

This petition, addressed to DWDC and NCW, outlined the issues of domestic violence and abuse faced by rural communities and proposed specific services to be made essential underlining the urgency of the situation.

Stop Domestic Violence #COVID19: Keep violence prevention services fully operational



Petition Closed
This petition had 11,516 supporters

 @smritilirani @NCWIndia
@sharmarekha Make domestic...

 **Share on Facebook**

 Send a Facebook message

 Send an email to friends

 Tweet to your followers

 Copy link

 Nipunika Thakur started this petition to Smriti Zubin Irani (Minister for Women and Child Development, Government of India) and 1 other

Image 3: Petition drawing attention to the issue of Domestic Violence

Link: [Keep Violence Prevention Services Operational](#)

No. of Supporters: 11,516

Current Status: Closed

b) STOP Domestic Violence #COVID19: Prime Minister include it in your message to the Nation

During the first phase of Lockdown the CHSJ worked with its community level partners to develop an Appeal to the Prime Minister and State Chief Ministers. The Appeal drew attention to the need for strengthening social solidarity along with physical distancing, respecting individual dignity and rights and for taking the community into confidence while addressing the emergency

This petition urged the Prime minister of India, Narendra Modi to address the issue of rising Domestic Violence in the wake of COVID19.



Image 4: Petition drawing attention to Domestic Violence

Link: [Stop Domestic Violence](#)

No. of Supporters: 756

Current Status: Open

3. #FIELDSTORIES: Incorporating a gender lens to understanding impact of CoVid 19

Extending emergency relief and monitoring scale of impact in numbers is important with a crisis this monstrous and massive, however often the person behind the suffering is lost. In a patriarchal society the impact of the pandemic is often from a male perspective. Since men are also much more in the public domain, the issue faced by women do not get the attention and the visibility. To correct this, we have been on the field, talking to women to gather case studies in order to further our understanding of the impact of the pandemic on women, especially. A gendered understanding is important for two reasons:

1. Women issues have been neglected even before – a global crisis of this proportion will further push women's issues down the priority list and undo all the progress we have made over the years.
2. Women issues are unique and need special attention. We cannot club them with general interventions and hope for a proportioned resolution for women.

We hope for the open source case studies to further our collective understanding and inform our interventions and policy recommendations. We are collaborating with other organisations to hear their experiences and voices of women from their geographies to extend our scope. Our stories have also been picked up by the media and have showcased in online news portals.



Image 5: A woman from rural Gujarat - Image by Gayatri Vaidya

SWATI has been putting out these case studies to capture the effects of the pandemic and treat it and its consequences on the individual. The stories can be read [here](#). A biweekly mailer, capturing stories from the field illustrating the gendered impact of COVID19 goes out to about 1550 entities including government and media. This series is an attempt to start a dialogue around individual experiences and to encourage organizations to share case studies from their geographies too. We hope to create a bank of case studies from across the nation to document the effect on the pandemic at a macro level and also to identify issues at various levels. Some of the other organizations have sent in their stories to us like the North East Network, and it has already been such an enriching experience which encourages gendered understanding through various voices.

4. Collaboration and Knowledge Building

1. Webinars and meetings:

We collaborated with other CSOs and organizations to build collective understanding and a comprehensive / inclusive response plan to COVID 19. SWATI has been active within the collaboration space by being part of and adding to the ongoing discourse through Webinars.

At SWATI, we have organized and been panelists on webinars raising awareness and deliberating on gendered impact of Covid 19, the increasing incidence of domestic violence and the importance of survivor support services.

2. Research Studies:

- **RCRC (Rapid Community Response to CoVid) Coalition:** SWATI is a member of rapid rural community response to COVID-19 (RCRC) a National Coalition of over 50 CSOs . The coalition is conducting a longitudinal research survey to monitor the impact of COVID-19 outbreak at the household level. It captures essential aspects of the impact such as availability of food, cash and employment, household level planning of agriculture and livestock activities in the coming seasons, status of well-being etc. SWATI was a part of that survey and collected data from 110 households from Dasada block of Surendranagar district in Gujarat to contribute to the nationwide needs assessment study on impact of the lock down on migrant workers, small and marginal farmers, tribal communities and vulnerable households. The survey forms were submitted online through an application and the team conducted the survey on phone through talking to 110 women. The data analysis for the first phase of the survey is being done currently.
- **Study to understand the impact of CoVid19 on women and girls :** SWATI Undertook a research study with Centre for Budgeting and policy Studies (CBPS) to understand the new 'normal' for girls and women in Gujarat: The gendered impact of COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown with an aim to document the challenges faced by women and girls in rural villages in Gujarat. Qualitative telephonic interviews with 20 women and girls from 2 villages (10 from each) have been planned and are currently being implemented. The area of enquiry include impact on income security, essential public services, coping mechanisms and violence. The focus is on mapping the impact on vulnerable groups - women with disabilities, single women, elderly, the infirm, and the transgender community.

There is rising awareness of the differential impact of COVID19 on women and girls. Because of the unequal status of women and girls, even seemingly simple things like temporary school closures and travel restrictions are likely to have long-term impact on the lives of women and girls. Apart from the concerns around domestic violence, child abuse, and sexual exploitation, there are also concerns around livelihoods, mobility, time poverty, and emotional well-being for women.

Therefore, it is critical to engage with a central question that has arisen out of this lockdown: What is the new 'normal' for rural women and girls? Understanding the answer to this question might provide us some insight into the existing inequalities that has been compounded by the daily practices and discourses of the pandemic and the lockdown. It can also help us address specific measure that can transform this new 'normal' towards a more egalitarian 'normal'. In

order for us to understand the structural, systemic, and endemic inequalities of this new normal, we first have to start examining women's lives in the context of Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown, and the likely situation that they are going to face post the lock-down.

In order to understand the specific issues faced by rural women during and post the lockdown period SWATI with Center for Budgeting and Policy Studies (CBPS) is has designed a study to generate information and document experiences that can help civil society, advocates, and researchers hold the government accountable for its actions in regards to the health crisis and the subsequent lockdown.

Learnings:

1. **Working remotely:** Remote working and working with secondary data brings with it challenges of its own. With little or no access to the communities in person and coordinating with the authorities for permissions on calls, getting a fair picture of the situation on field has proven to be challenging. Given that women anyway have access to lesser resources, with only 38% who have access to cell phones, inquiry into their concerns is very restricted. Women facing violence, even if they have access to a phone, do not have space or time to get in touch with our counselors since their perpetrators are at home and they are under the watchful eye of their abusers the all the time.
2. **Communication:** Learning to shift entire operations on the phone has been an interesting experience. From dealing with issues of network in communicating with field teams in remote areas, to trying to strategize and operationalize everything using technology, it has been a challenging but fun experience. Developing new skills like learning to fill research forms online and handholding our field teams through the process has been very motivating – especially we have all been working under very tight deadlines given the nature of the emergency.
3. **Needs Identification:** Identifying the ones in need for the purpose of relief work required a lot of brainstorming about how we define those in need, what area their needs lie in and how much we could provide and how. Since we are not a relief organization all this was very new to us. Working closely with local authorities and an immense amount of support from the Panchayats really made the smooth relief effort a reality in such a short duration.

Ongoing and Onwards

Our core thought of working towards a post CoVid 19 world is to work with local bodies under women's leadership, bring in innovations as well as create and promote self-sustaining and sustainable interventions. Following are some of the interventions we are working towards:

- Work with the Gram Panchayats - awareness on COVID 19 and increased coordination with health systems, PDS, MNREGA, and other entitlements.
- Provide/set-up Psychosocial support, phone counselling and violence prevention services at the block level Sustainable agricultural and non-traditional livelihood for women and girls.
- Advocacy to set up POSH committees at the GP level linked to the local complaints committee at block and district level.
- Advocacy for child care support/ crèches by government.
- Targeted campaigns for promoting mobile phone use and digital learning for girls leading the digital campaign.
- Studies and documentation to understand the gendered impact of COVID19.