



Second Chances

FIRST STEPS

The Balika Shivar Experience

Rajasthan and Jharkhand, India (2022-2025)

This material is intended solely for information and educational purposes to further aid Plan India's development work, and is produced in accordance with applicable laws.

“Those who take a step ahead, those who try ... never lose in life.”

These words expressed spontaneously by an adolescent girl at a remote location in Rajasthan (India) reflect her journey from being withdrawn and hesitant to quiet confidence, from carrying the label of a drop out to an enthusiastic learner eager to give her class X examination through the open school system.

“We are not less than men. We can contribute to our families in many ways. Also, when you earn more, you get respected more.”

A group of women in their 20s in a tribal location in Jharkhand are vocal about the agency they are now experiencing through involvement in vocational training opportunities and initiating livelihoods.

These vignettes form part of a larger canvas of change ushered by the Balika Shivar project implemented in Rajasthan and Jharkhand during 2022-25 by Plan India. Supported by Z Zurich Foundation, it brought together interventions on second chance education, vocational training for Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) women and Sakhi Sangam collectives (of girls and young women) for mutual support and seeking solutions for their concerns. Volunteer engagement formed another vibrant component. Partnerships were built and strengthened with a range of key stakeholders including communities, Panchayati Raj Institutions, district and block administrations, relevant government departments and agencies as well as state and national bodies. An array of reassuring results emerged including contributions to strengthening systems. In many ways, the project was a key learning experience for Plan India and Z Zurich Foundation.

This process document captures all these dynamic and enriching journeys of collaborations and transformations. It highlights inputs provided, challenges faced, breakthroughs and insights gained. The innovations, promising and good practices that emerged are included. Suggestions for continuing and emerging areas of attention are outlined as well.

Ultimately, the document is a testimony to the girls and women who gradually became champions for themselves and the allies who stepped up for them.

This document, then, looks back on the distance travelled together so that new milestones can be achieved in the future.

PROJECT BALI

CELEBRATING INNOVATION

BALIKA SHIVIR

ZURICH



BALIKA SHIVIR





Message

from Z Zurich Foundation

Barbara Jordan

Regional Engagement Manager
Asia Pacific
Z Zurich Foundation

In 2021, the Z Zurich Foundation recognised the need to strengthen education and vocational training of girls and women in rural India. Together with Plan India, we embarked on this journey by establishing over 60 Accelerated Learning Centers (Balika Shivar) at community level in Rajasthan and Jharkhand.

Since then, Balika Shivar has become an important blueprint for second chance education, reconnecting individuals and entire communities to existing education pathways and government schemes for vocational training. So far, thousands of young girls and women have been empowered to take agency of their own futures.

Plan India quickly established strong relationships with many institutional stakeholders at all levels, connected community members with these decision makers and advocating for breaking down barriers to learning for young girls and women.

The present document serves not only as a record of the processes and achievements but also as a springboard for ongoing collaboration and advocacy. The valuable lessons learned and innovative methodologies adopted can inform similar interventions in other contexts and shape policy, programme design and future investments.

The road traveled until now has set an extraordinary foundation. As we look to the future, it is our responsibility to protect these achievements and sustain and scale the impact. By sharing these experiences widely, Plan India and Z Zurich Foundation hope to inspire partnerships and strategic alliances to strengthen this commitment.

At a personal level, I continue to be inspired by the courage and resilience of the young girls and women who found their voice through this program and follow their dreams. Together, we can transform so many more lives. Let's do it.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'B Jordan'.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Accredited Institution
ALM	Accelerated Learning Manual
ASER	Annual Status of Education Report
ASHA	Accredited Social Health Activist
B/G	Boys/Girls
BDO	Block Development Officer
BEd	Bachelor of Education
BEO	Block Education Officer
DC	District Collector
DCPU	District Child Protection Unit
DEO	District Education Officer
FIR	First Information Report
FSSAI	Food Safety and Standards Authority of India
GER	Gross Enrolment Ratio
GPDP	Gram Panchayat Development Plan
ICAR	Indian Council of Agricultural Research
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Services
ILO	International Labour Organisation
JSLPS	Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society
KVK	Krishi Vigyan Kendra
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NCPCR	National Commission for Protection of Child Rights
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
NGO	Non Government Organisation
NIOS	National Institute of Open Schooling
NSS	National Sample Survey
OBC	Other Backward Classes
PEEO	Panchayat Elementary Education Officer
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institution
RSOS	Rajasthan State Open School
SC	Scheduled Caste
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEL	Socio-Emotional Learning
SHG	Self Help Group
SHO	Station House Officer
SSOID	Single Sign-On ID (Identification)
ST	Scheduled Tribe
SVEEP	Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation
TC	Transfer Certificate
ToT	Training of Trainer
UDISE	Unified District Information System for Education

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शिक्षण और निष्ठा
PLAN INDIA
7-12-2024
शिक्षण जीवन का आधार है।
सारे मिला सब बेहतर है।

शिक्षण बेटी के जीवन
का आधार है।
यह उसकी संस्कृति
का अभिन्न हिस्सा है।

समय और शिक्षण का
सबसे श्रेष्ठ व्यक्ति
को सफल बनाता है।

Time	Day	Subject
9:30	Monday	Maths
11:00	Tuesday	Science
12:30	Wednesday	English
14:00	Thursday	History
15:30	Friday	Art
17:00	Saturday	Sports
18:30	Sunday	Religion



Setting the Stage



The Canvas

Girls and women in India strive to exercise their voices and choices while navigating a complex matrix of constraints. Adolescence (10-19 years), a key transitional stage, often represents a shrinking of their worlds as they are forced to move away from relative freedoms of childhood towards restrictive, adult pathways.¹ For instance, girls bear the disproportionate burden of maintaining family (and community) honour that places restrictions on their aspirations, mobility and relationships to fit within traditional stereotypes of virtue and chastity. Also, they are expected to treat household responsibilities and caregiving as their primary concerns. These gendered and patriarchal beliefs and expectations play out to various extents across locations. However, they do remain deeply embedded within the social fabric. Moreover, in geographies with predominant male son preference, girls and women end up spending their lives overshadowed by the knowledge that they were born unwanted.

The constraints and deficits are magnified as gender intersects with caste, tribe, class, religion and other

markers of identity. Socially ascribed norms, poverty and lack of access to resources and opportunities combine to greater cumulative disadvantage. The effects are visible in the significant domain of education. Here, it is important to note that many children begin with foundational deficits in learning levels. The Covid 19 pandemic also deepened vulnerabilities, including implications of a digital divide in accessing education. **The diverging effects of location (rural/urban), gender and other markers of identity become more visible at the secondary and higher secondary levels.** This divergence, then, manifests as women who are **not in education, employment or training (NEET)** as well.

Further, child marriages (wherein girls are married before the legal marriageable age of 18 years) remains an unfortunate reality in India. There are clear interlinkages here. Deeply rooted socio-cultural norms and poverty perpetuate this harmful practice. Significantly, child marriage becomes less likely as girls' education levels increase². Moreover, regular engagement in education reduces risks of being absorbed in child labour or being enticed more easily by traffickers.



¹ GAGE (Gender and Adolescence Global Evidence), 2018. *Gender, livelihood capabilities and women's economic empowerment Reviewing evidence over the life course* Naila Kabeer

² NCPDR and Young Lives. *India Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy Based on NFHS4 2015-16*

At a Disadvantage

In education

***46.8%** children in standard 1 in government schools can read at least letters; 54.4% can recognise at least 1-9 numbers

***Boys hold a slight edge** - can read at least letters (b: 47.1%, g: 46.5%), can recognise at least 1-9 numbers (b: 55.8%, g: 52.9%)
[ASER 2018]

***Children lost about 18 months of schooling** due to the Covid 19 pandemic.

***Only 18.3%** of children in rural government schools accessed video lessons, and **8.1%** attended live online classes
[ASER 2020]

*Transition rates:

Primary to Upper Primary

B: 93.0%, **G:** 93.4%

SC: 90%, **ST:** 88%, **OBC:** 93.5%, **Others:** 94.5%

Upper Primary to Secondary

B: 89.7%, **G:** 87.8%

SC: 85%, **ST:** 83%, **OBC:** 89%, **Others:** 90.2%

Secondary to Senior Secondary

B: 77.6%, **G:** 79.3%

SC: 65%, **ST:** 63.5%, **OBC:** 78.5%, **Others:** 80.1%

*Dropout rates at secondary level

(class IX-X)

ST: 16.62%, **OBC:** 12.87%, **SC:** 12.55%, **Girls:**

12.25%

[UDISE 2021-22; Response to a question in Rajya Sabha]

Other Key Concerns

One in three of the world's **child brides** live in India; those from rural areas, poorer households and with limited education at higher risk

23.3% of women aged 20–24 years married before 18 years
[NFHS-5, 2019–21]

In workforce

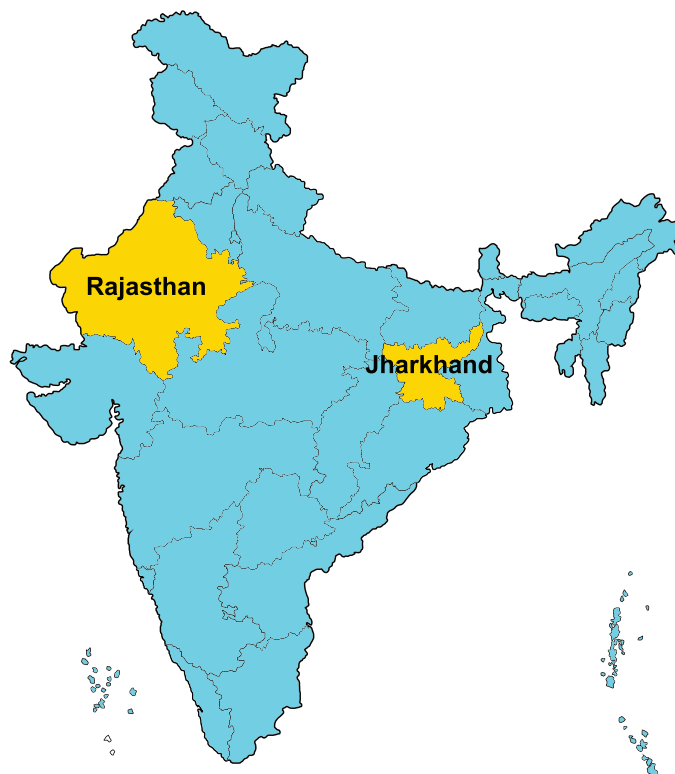
43.8 % of women aged

15–24 years are NEET (rural 45.9 %, urban 38.3 %), rising to **51.7 %** for women aged **15–29 years** (rural 52.4 %, urban 50.0 %)

Reasons: mainly engagement in domestic duties (response for 89.8%), not seeking/being available for work, not able to work due to health conditions
[NSS Multiple Indicator Survey 2020-21]

Among youth, **48.4%** women are NEET compared to 9.8% for men
[ILO 2022]

32.8% women's participation in labour force
[Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2021-22]



The Contexts: Rajasthan and Jharkhand

The two Indian states of Rajasthan and Jharkhand represent vivid diversities as well as common, persisting challenges.

Rajasthan

Located in western India, Rajasthan is a predominantly rural state with a population of about 6.86 crore. It has a literacy rate of 66.1% (male: 79.2%, female: 52.1%)³. The state encompasses multiple forms of settlements including semi clustered and dispersed patterns, particularly in the desert and hilly regions. It mirrors the national trend in terms of gradually reducing transition rates from primary to senior secondary level for girls and boys. The drop in enrolment is more noticeable across ST, SC and OBC communities. Overall, girls' access to education is affected by a complex interplay of factors including gendered norms that often do not prioritise girls and their education, distance to secondary and higher secondary schools, concerns about safety and lack of adequate infrastructure (e.g., sufficient number of toilets for girls) and lack of support from parents who may themselves

have been unable to study/provide inputs to their children. Moreover, child marriage remains socially sanctioned in parts of the state, leading to disruption of schooling and endangering the present and future of adolescent girls and women.



Rajasthan Snapshot

Education			
Enrolment Rates (UDISE 2021-22)			
Population Sub group	Level	Enrolment (Boys)	Enrolment (Girls)
SC	Primary	109.2%	114.8%
	Secondary	82.7%	79.9%
	Higher Secondary	73.8%	71.1%
ST	Primary	108.3%	108.9%
	Secondary	79.0%	74.4%
	Higher Secondary	73.2%	69.0%
OBC	Primary	48.5%	48.1%
	Secondary	50.5%	49.8%
	Higher Secondary	50.5%	49.1%

³ Demographics & Statistics | State Portal, Rajasthan Government; Census 2011 (<https://rajasthan.gov.in/pages/sm/department-page/149121/930>)

Retention Rates

Girls' retention in education slips from a high of 94.6% in primary level to 28.5% at senior secondary level. Boys also experience a similar downward trajectory from 90.7% to 26.7%. However, the gradual shift away from education for girls has significant short term and long term, intergenerational consequence.

Child Marriage

25.4% women in the age group of 20-24 years are married before the legal age of 18 years **3.7%** women in age group of 15-19 years are already mothers or pregnant (at the time of survey)

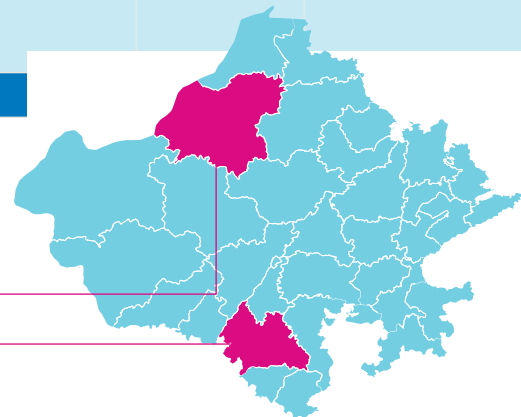
Heightened vulnerabilities in Bikaner and Udaipur (NFHS 5, 2019-21)

Indicator	Bikaner	Udaipur
Female population age 6 years and above who ever attended school	64.6%	63.8%
Women who are literate	62.5%	62%
Women with 10 or more years of schooling	30.2%	30.1%
Women age 20-24 years married before age 18 years	33.3%	18.2 %
Women age 15-19 years who were already mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey	6.5%	4.5%

NEET Women

42.3% girls and young women (15-24 years) fall in the NEET category (NSS Multiple Indicator Survey 2021)

Bikaner ●
Udaipur ●



Jharkhand

The state of Jharkhand, located in eastern India, was formed in 2000 from erstwhile Bihar. It has a population of 3.3 crore. It is predominantly peopled by tribal communities (26.2%). It has a literacy rate of 66.41% (male: 76.84%, female: 55.42%)⁴. Scattered hamlets, known as *tolas*, constitute a predominant feature. Educational attainments, particularly at higher levels, remain compromised. For instance, a study has shown that only 42-43% of children (boys and girls) had completed class X. Only 38% of married girls had completed

class X. Reasons for low enrolment and discontinuation included poverty and other economic factors, lesser value and related attitudes about schooling, factors related to schools (accessibility, failure in last exam etc), illnesses and deaths in the family, lack of personal interest as well as marriage and child bearing.⁵ In fact, child marriage is a key concern in Jharkhand as well. Moreover, Jharkhand, unfortunately, has also emerged as a hub for trafficking of girls, particularly from tribal communities, for labour. Too often, what seemingly began as voluntary migration spirals into situations of risk and forced labour⁶.

Jharkhand Snapshot

Education

Enrolment Rates (UDISE 2021-22)

Population Sub group	Level	Enrolment (Boys)	Enrolment (Girls)
SC	Primary	108.1%	110.7%
	Secondary	65.0%	72.7%
	Higher Secondary	39.5%	45.9%
ST	Primary	105.1%	107.4%
	Secondary	59.2%	63.6%
	Higher Secondary	35.6%	40.0%
OBC	Primary	47.4%	47.7%
	Secondary	49.1%	50.3%
	Higher Secondary	46.6%	46.6%

Retention Rates

Girls' retention in education dips from a high of 91.7% in primary level to 42.9% at senior secondary level. Boys also experience a similar downward trajectory from 89.8% to 45.6%. However, the gradual shift away from education for girls has significant short term and long term, intergenerational consequence.

Child Marriage

37.9% women in the age group of 20-24 years are married before the legal age of 18 years

Heightened vulnerabilities in Hazaribagh and West Singhbhum (NFHS 5, 2019-21)

Indicator	Hazaribagh	West Singhbhum
Female population age 6 years and above who ever attended school	64.6%	63.8%
Women who are literate	62.5%	62%
Women with 10 or more years of schooling	30.2%	30.1%
Women age 20-24 years married before age 18 years	33.3%	18.2 %
Women age 15-19 years who were already mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey	6.5%	4.5%

NEET Women

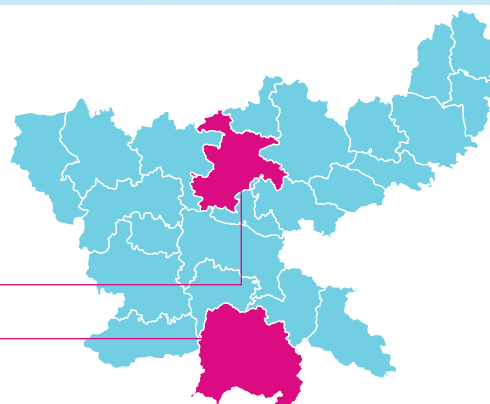
42.3% girls and young women (15-24 years)

fall in the NEET category (NSS Multiple

Indicator Survey 2021)

Hazaribagh ●

West Singhbhum ●



⁴Jharkhand State Minority Commission; Census 2011 (<https://jsmc.co.in/citizen-charter.php>)

⁵Jejeebhoy, Shireen J., Raushan, M.R., Gupta, S., Bhattacharya B. 2019. *The Situation of Adolescents in Jharkhand: Findings from the DASRA State-wide Survey*

⁶IMPRI Impact and Policy Research Institute. *The Dark Side of Migration: Trafficking of Women for Domestic Labour in Jharkhand* (<https://www.impriindia.com/insights/migration-traffick-domesti-labour-jhar/>)

Opportunities for Change

Undoubtedly, there have been significant advances in universal enrolment for girls and boys particularly for elementary levels across the country, including Rajasthan and Jharkhand. This has been spurred by The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 and backed by programmatic measures through the erstwhile Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. The revamped and integrated **Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan** takes the next step—ensuring focus on the consolidated educational trajectory from pre-primary to secondary and senior secondary levels. This continuity of attention and efforts is reaffirmed through the **National Education Policy 2020** which upholds respect for local contexts, equity and inclusion. The emphasis is on provisioning for holistic, quality education that encourages academic excellence as well as vital life skills. Higher education and vocational education components are prioritised to enable students to lead more well-rounded lives, gain economic independence and contribute to the nation. Significantly, the Policy aims to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education from 26.3 % in 2018 to 50% by 2035.⁷

There are also **numerous central and state government specific initiatives that encourage girls' education in secondary and senior secondary levels**. Schemes and initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Central Board of Secondary Education Udan Scholarship, Mukhya Manti Ladli Yojana and Savitribai Phule Kishori Samridhi Yojana (Jharkhand) and Mukhya Mantri Humari Betiyan Yojana and Rajshree Yojana (Rajasthan) provision for support in multiple ways⁸. Many of these schemes also aim to, explicitly or implicitly, discourage gendered bias and promote the wellbeing of girls.

The **open school system**, in particular, is an important pathway for girls and young women who had dropped out to due to various reasons to

resume their educational journeys. The **National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS)** offers significant advantages in terms of low or no fee structures (for girls and women) and provisioning for nine attempts in five years with scope of selecting an examination period from two slots during the year. The class X and XII certificates provided by NIOS are recognised and on par with the national and state level boards. It, thus, can form a crucial component for realising second chance education.

Second Chance Education

recognises that vulnerable and disadvantaged girls and young women face substantial barriers in resuming education through conventional means. It proactively seeks to address such constraints and bridge the physical and psychological distance between girls and women and educational institutions. Second chance education, then, incorporates an emphasis on the open school system as well as a constellation of other relevant inputs (including alternative pedagogies) so that girls' and women can resume their educational trajectories, complete secondary and senior secondary levels and build a more solid foundation for their futures.

Meanwhile, **skilling young women and helping them connect with livelihood opportunities** is also a growing area of engagement in the country. This emphasis is embedded in the National Skill Development Mission 2015, various flagship schemes (such as Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushal Yojana)⁹ as well as the State Rural Livelihood Missions¹⁰ in the country. Women, particularly in groups, can access an expanding

⁷UGC. *Salient Features of NEP 2020* (5294663_Salient-Featuresofnep-Eng-merged.pdf)

⁸*Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (Save the girl child, educate the girl child) is a flagship initiative of the Government aimed at addressing declining Child Sex Ratio and promoting the survival, education and protection of girls. Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) *Udan Scholarship*: This scheme supports girls in classes XI and XII in government, government affiliated and CBSE schools, to prepare for joining engineering institutions. *Mukhya Mantri Ladli Yojana*, launched by Government of Jharkhand, provides families with financial incentives for the birth and education of girls. *Savitribai Phule Kishori Samridhi Yojana* provides annual financial incentives specifically for girls in classes VIII to XII. *Mukhya Mantri Humari Betiyan Yojana*, initiated by Government of Rajasthan, provides financial incentives to meritorious girl students in class XI and XII which can be extended till post graduate level. *Rajshree Yojana* provides periodic financial incentives from the birth of a girl child till admission in class XII. The schemes have specific criteria that need to be met.

array of financial services through banks and other designated institutions. Moreover, a range of state and state affiliated bodies such as Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVK)¹¹ and Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR)¹² can offer support for women for specific trades.

Of course, there is also a growing acknowledgment of socio-cultural and gendered challenges (such as holding responsibility for fulfilling household responsibilities and care giving with managing livelihoods, restrictions on mobility, limited exposure to markets and access to such resources) as well as predominant engagement in lower paying and informal work that continue to constrain women. It also becomes particularly important to locate the training initiatives closer to the women so that they can access the same.

There is, then, considerable need and scope in supporting girls and young women in accessing second chance education and skilling opportunities. Non-government organisations can act as a crucial link that draw on their connect with and understanding of local communities to facilitates such interlinkages and make a significant difference. The **Balika Shivar Project: Accelerated Learning Centre for Girls** took shape in response to these considerations.

Balika Shivar Project: An Outline

Plan International (India Chapter) (hereafter referred to as Plan India) was uniquely suited to design and implement a comprehensive project that supported out of school girls and young women in returning to education and gaining financial independence through vocational training. The organisation remains committed to creating lasting impacts in the lives of girls and favoured gender transformative, community-

centred and collaborative approaches with key stakeholders that contribute to sustainable improvements.

The Balika Shivar project aligned with the purpose of Plan India's Country Strategy V (2022-2027) i.e., Girls and Young Women are Empowered to Take Action and Get Equal. It could, thus, contribute to the Strategy's ambition of One Crore girls and young women in India Learn, Lead, Decide and Thrive through gender transformative programming. The project was **aligned to two programming priority areas** and sub impact area/thematic components within them.

(1) Inclusive and Quality Education

**Girls complete secondary and senior secondary education*

(2) Youth Household and Economic Security

**Job oriented vocational training*

Significantly, the project's conceptual framework was aligned with Plan India's GT Programme that aims to explicitly transform unequal gender power relations by addressing the root causes and promoting the value of girls and women. The **elements** of understanding and addressing gender norms that influence children through their life courses, working to strengthen girls and young women's agency, improving the conditions and social position of girls and young women and fostering an enabling environment where all

⁹ *Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana* is a Government of India initiative aimed at supporting youth in undergoing outcome-based and industry relevant skills training and enhancing their employability. *Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushal Yojana*, another flagship initiative, covers rural youth particularly from poor families. They are provided training in industry relevant skills and supported in finding jobs with regular monthly wages. The scheme is a part of the poverty reduction component within the National Rural Livelihood Mission

¹⁰ The National and State Rural Livelihood Missions together constitute India's concerted attempt at mobilising the rural poor and helping them improve their financial wellbeing, with a conscious emphasis on strengthening women self help groups. The State Rural Livelihood Missions form the state level equivalent and function as autonomous bodies within the broader mandate of the national mission.

¹¹ *Krishi Vigyan Kendra* are district level, agricultural extension units operated through agricultural universities and supported by the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India. The main purpose is to enhance productivity, profitability and sustainability of agricultural practices using science and technology while remained farmer centred.

¹² *Indian Council for Agricultural Research* is an autonomous organisation under the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India. It is the apex body for research and education in agriculture including horticulture and animal sciences with related institutes across the country. It began as Pusa Institute in 1905 (since it was located in Pusa, Bihar).

stakeholders work together to support children and youth proved to be organic influences on the project design. It was conscious of the need to consider girls and young women in their diversity. Moreover, the project also sought to work on another vital element – i.e., working with boys, young men and men to embrace positive masculinities.

The project took shape with the proactive support of **Z Zurich Foundation** (formed as a charitable and development initiative of the Zurich Insurance Group). Enabling social equity constituted an area of engagement for Z Zurich Foundation within its broader focus on creating brighter futures for vulnerable people. The Balika Shivar project was also aligned to its intrinsic focus on scaling up impacts through collaborative partnerships and contributing to systems strengthening.

Balika Shivar Project: At A Glance

Objectives

- 1 Support 3600 girls (13-18 years)** to reach secondary and senior secondary school milestones
- 2 Build capacities of 3600 girls and young women (19-24 years)** in vocational training for livelihood preparation
- 3 To increase enrolment, retention and regularity of other community girls** in schools through a social alumni group called Sakhi Sangam

It was also envisaged that these interventions would reduce vulnerabilities of girls and young women and help prevent child marriage and trafficking for labour

Time Period

July 2022 to June 2025

Location

Initiated with villages within one block in each district chosen based on

- Low female literacy rate (based on secondary data)
- Maximum number of drop out adolescent girls after class VIII
- Have secondary and higher secondary schools
- Number of NEET women (where such data is available)
- Accessible by public transport
- Proximity to NIOS centres
- Where Plan India's sponsorship programme is operational
- Prioritised by block administration as hotspot for child marriage

Bikaner (**Lunkaransar**) and Udaipur (**Jhadol**) in Rajasthan

Hazaribagh (**Churchu**) and West Singhbhum (**Khutpani**) in Jharkhand

More blocks were added in the subsequent year. Please see pg 22 and 34 for more.

A Dynamic Start

The project was initiated in July 2022. Recruitment for the project was undertaken in keeping with Plan India's Human Resource Policy and related procedures. Programme Manager (central, India Country Office - Delhi level) and programme coordinators and cluster coordinators (district level) were selected first. The team underwent a detailed orientation on the project including objectives and the implementation plan India. There was an emphasis on understanding the contexts as well as the need for responsive interventions including use of accessible teaching learning methods for the girls and young women at the Balika Shivirs.

Recruitment for teachers was undertaken. Post graduation (Masters' level) was a key requirement. Also, those holding BEd degree, indicating qualification for teaching, were preferred. Finding teachers proved to be challenging. The expectations of teachers for Balika Shivirs belied common perceptions. For instance, Balika Shivir teachers would need to travel and engage with girls and families in their homes. The academic and non-academic components called for specific attitudes and skills that could aid second chance education. Moreover, women teachers were also embedded in the same social contexts. Thus, apprehensions

about family permissions and concerns with the expected mobility surfaced repeatedly. Abilities of expression – an essential prerequisite for teachers – varied significantly. Many of them also remained uncertain about their own capacities for the role. These were also symptomatic of their contexts wherein varied quality of educational institutions (particularly at remote locations) and limited exposure for girls and women were common. Nonetheless, persistent efforts proved successful.

The teachers, across the four districts, received training on teaching methodologies. This included understanding and drafting lesson plans, use of various aids and other important aspects of engaging with the girls and young women. Mock teaching sessions were also conducted. The cluster coordinators were covered in these trainings as well.

Significantly, the project teams contacted the District Collectors (DCs) and the State Education Department functionaries from the initial stage of the project itself. This facilitated their ownership, especially of the DCs. Thus, an emphasis on convergent action took explicit shape.

The teams were on the threshold of a journey that would transform them as well.



A photograph of a classroom setting, overlaid with a blue tint. A teacher is standing at the front, writing on a whiteboard. Several students are sitting on the floor, facing the teacher. The room has posters on the wall, including one for 'PROJECT BALIKA SHIVIR' and another for 'ZURICH Foundation'. The text 'A Learning and Safe Space of Our Own: Balika Shivir' is written in large, bold, yellow letters in the center of the image.

A Learning and Safe Space of Our Own: Balika Shivir



The Processes

Conceptualising Balika Shivar

The Balika Shivar Centres were the heart of all the action. These were envisaged as **welcoming, safe, enabling and learning spaces for girls and young women**. A centre would typically cater to about 30 learners who would be supported in qualifying class X and XII exams (as applicable) through the open school system. It would be managed by a teacher belonging to the same or neighbouring areas. This would ensure that they were aware of local contexts and languages and connect better with the girls and young women. Moreover, they would utilise participatory and accessible methods in the teaching learning processes. Thus, **accelerated learning** was prioritised from the onset – i.e., utilising non-conventional/alternative approaches and aids that would help the girls and young women overcome their existing educational deficits faster.

Significantly, while the project had incorporated rent costs, the teams felt that the centres should preferably be run within spaces provided by the gram panchayats and local communities. This would ensure their ownership and involvement.

At a fundamental level, the centres aimed to offer and nurture expression and sharing for girls and young women many of whom would have, typically, known more deprivations and constraints than freedom and agency. The second chance education component was embedded within this broader understanding. It recognised the implicit connections between their educational trajectories and the socio-cultural contexts which shaped their lives.

Finding The Girls

The first step, then, was to identify the girls who could be enrolled with NIOS. Door to door survey was initiated in the identified blocks. Further, the project coordinators and cluster coordinators

engaged with local schools to obtain lists of girls who had dropped out. They contacted the gram panchayats as well as Anganwadi Workers for information. They also reached out to the NIOS centres in the districts, introduced the project and sought lists of girls that the teams could follow up on.

Teams, across the four locations, faced apprehensions and misgivings from local communities. This was often connected with prior negative experiences with individuals and organisations/bodies that had promised support/interventions and backed out. Moreover, there were some instances of people being cheated in various ways including being asked to pay exorbitant amounts for enrolment or even for clearing the open school exams.

However, the teams also found people who were receptive and offered support and information readily. Persistent engagements with key community stakeholders and local schools helped forge relationships and provided a good foundation for subsequent efforts. Meanwhile, the efforts at connecting with NIOS centres in Rajasthan held an important insight in terms of relative accessibility particularly when compared to the Rajasthan State Open School Board (see *section Getting Enrolled*).

The next task fell largely upon the teachers. They had to initiate contact with the girls who had dropped out and convince the parents and girls about joining Balika Shivar. This proved to be extremely demanding. All four project locations had dispersed settlements and teachers had to travel considerable distances.

Significantly, girls' education - and that too through the open school - did not appear to be priority for an overwhelming majority of the parents/guardians contacted. There was lack of awareness as well as various myths and misconceptions about NIOS. Some challenges were also internal – about the teachers' perceptions of their own abilities and the initial struggles in embracing their roles.



Looking Back: Teachers' Reminisce

Common Challenges

“We would often hear the same things – What is the point in educating her further? She has to marry and handle household responsibilities only. Or, she has dropped out. There is no need for her to study more.”

“Many people were not ready to trust us initially. They doubted if this was another fraud or scam.”

“We were often asked – how will you prepare these girls to pass the class X exam? They dropped out a long time ago. There were some who felt that one teacher at the Balika Shivar cannot teach five subjects.”

“Many had not heard about the open school system. There were also misconceptions. People did not know that the girls would get marksheets and certificates. There were others who felt the certificate had no value and would not help in getting jobs. There was no future. Most did not treat it as something important. The Panchayats were not aware of open school also.”

“We also heard some people say that it (open school) was only for girls and, therefore, not of much value.”

“We had identified girls and listed them. But then when we went to meet them again for the NIOS enrolment, some had moved away (i.e., migrated).”

“I was not very confident about talking to the families initially, how to convince them.”

“This was not like a typical job, not like a typical teacher. I wasn't sure if I would be able to do it.”

Specific Challenges

“We had to go through dense forest to reach the settlements. This included deserted stretches of forest roads. Elephant herds from Odisha were also known to cross these paths and we had to be careful.” (West Singhbhum)

“The houses were located across different hillocks. Often, there would be one house per hillock. A scooty or a bike could not be used after a point. We would climb steep paths multiple times in a day to reach the girls and their families.” (Udaipur)

“Some parents had concerns about girls running away. They felt that the girls would elope if they allowed them to come to the centre.” (Udaipur)



The teachers found supporters as well including among ASHAs and Anganwadi Sevikas. Often, girls provided information about their peers who could also join the Balika Shivar. Some even began accompanying the teachers during the house visits.

These initial experiences also fuelled several **strategic decisions**. The teams had focused on girls who had studied till class VIII. It was evident that there was a much higher proportion of girls who had dropped out at the primary stage (class V) itself. These girls were also identified and added. Also, the teams met married young women who were 19-20 years old but could possibly join the Balika Shivar along with their younger sister in laws. After further discussion, the upper age limit for Balika Shivar was revised. The accepted age range was 14-24 years covering girls and young women. Further, considering dispersed settlements and terrain related aspects, it was not possible to identify 300 girls from a single block in a district. New locations

Blocks Added in The First Year (2022-23)

Bikaner: Lunkaransar + *Kolayet*

Udaipur: Jhadol + *Phalasiya*

Hazaribagh: Churchu + *Daru*

West Singhbhum: Khutpani + *Sadar*

(i.e., blocks) were added based on inputs and suggestions from district and block functionaries and internal discussions. The original criteria were also utilised (*see section on Project Outline in chapter 1*).



Getting Enrolled

It was learned that Rajasthan had NIOS centres at the district level. Comparatively, the Rajasthan State Open School had centres at block level. This would enhance accessibility for the girls and young women. The Bikaner and Udaipur teams recommended working with RSOS (rather than NIOS). This was discussed at Plan India Country Office and agreed upon. This was another **key**

strategic decision taken in the best interest of the girls and young women.

The enrolment process enhanced the teams' understanding of NIOS and RSOS. Some functionaries (at AI centres) helped from the onset. For others, multiple visits and interactions between the functionaries and the girls and their parents (who came to the AIs) helped in developing working relationships.

	NIOS	RSOS
Process of enrolment	<p>Undertaken in bulk through the NIOS head office in New Delhi; Subsequently confirmation was required from the Regional Office (Ranchi), more so because exam admit cards issued from here</p> <p>[Same process followed in second and third year]</p>	<p>Forms obtained and filled at Accredited Institutions (AIs) typically located in government schools; no fees for girls and women since this was directly covered by the Department of Child and Women Development, Government of Rajasthan</p> <p>[Second year onwards: RSOS initiated online enrolment where forms could be filled at Emitra kiosks run under a state government initiative for facilitating online access to a range of services; payment for accessing Emitra service to be made]</p>
Documents needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Aadhar card ▶ For class XII- marksheet and certificate of passing class X ▶ Photo ▶ Mobile number ▶ Transfer Certificate needed for long term use (not mandatory) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Aadhar card ▶ Jan Aadhar ▶ Marksheet of last exam passed and Transfer Certificate ▶ Photo ▶ Mobile number
Key challenges faced and overcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Girls' names and date of birth were given differently in various documents. This needed additional efforts including extensive follow up with the parents so that they could get the necessary changes done. ▶ Girls did not have transfer certificate from the school last attended. The process of obtaining the TC, especially if the girl had dropped out a while ago, was time consuming and required sustained efforts. Even where the TC was not an explicit requirement (as in NIOS), it still constituted a crucial document. Team members had to take the lead here in negotiating with the schools and supporting the girls and families in getting the TCs. 	

Meanwhile, the window of enrolment for RSOS was July to October. This had created immense pressure to identify and enrol the girls quickly. However, RSOS decided to open another period of enrolment during January 1-15 with a late fee. All the girls at the Balika Shivar could then be enrolled. Plan India covered the costs of the late fee. By January 2023, 1199 girls had been enrolled with NIOS and RSOS.

Finalising Our Space

Meanwhile, the teams were also busy identifying a suitable space for locating the Balika Shivar. As shared earlier, the emphasis was on encouraging community members and gram panchayats to provide the space. It had to be accessible and safe. There were other requirements as well such as sufficient space (including for displays and storage of materials), access to water supply, toilets etc¹³. The teams engaged in discussions with the gram panchayat, parents and other key community members as well as frontline workers like ASHAs and Anganwadi Sevikas for identifying such spaces. Girls were consulted as well.

At most locations, community members were wary of giving up a common space (such as a community hall) fearing that it would not be looked after or that they would not be allowed to use it subsequently. The teams allayed these fears affirming their continued ownership and stating that the spaces would only be used for running the centres and related activities. Such concerns were expected. However, an overwhelming sense of silent antagonism experienced at one location in Bikaner left the team befuddled. It was gradually learned that a private school used to function in the identified space. The principal had attempted to sexually abuse a girl. The community had forced the closure of the school. The building fell into disrepair. Community members began to use the space to tie their cattle. The team undertook continuous dialogue with the panchayat and community members and was able to finally convince them. Together with the girls, they were able to bring new life and energy to the site, gradually upturning the negative connotations.

By end September 2022, the first centres had opened in Makdadev (Udaipur), Kedchelum (West Singhbhum) and Jamdiya (Hazaribagh). Bikaner followed suit with a centre in Kalu. Further, in



“

“They (Plan) shared what they wanted to do. This would benefit our girls and we agreed. We gave them space in our Panchayat Bhawan. We have seen closely what they do. We are very satisfied with their work.”

(Nirmal Kumar Meena, Gram Panchayat Secretary, Makdadev, Udaipur)

”

¹³A Minimum Standards Checklist for Balika Shivar was developed.

Udaipur, the teams agreed to provide rent for some of the spaces on the insistence of local communities¹⁴. Significantly, local communities that had charged rent waived the amounts in the second year. They had seen the benefits of the ongoing work. By December 2022, 49 Balika Shivar were operational across the four districts.



as girls and young women made their way to the centres across the districts. In Udaipur, few miscreants threw stones at a centre. The teams took up these incidents with the gram panchayat pradhans/sarpanch¹⁶. In Udaipur, for instance, the sarpanch assured his support and such incidents were not repeated. In a way, these incidents also strengthened the resolve of the teachers and girls at the Balika Shivar to not give up and show others what they were capable of.

In Bikaner, girls who attended the centres regularly began visiting peers in their homes. They would give a notebook and pen and share a small task. These girls were then told to come to the centre and submit the work. Most of the girls complied. And this marked the beginning of their journeys with Balika Shivar.

Coming to The Centre

The initial days saw a trickle of girls at the centres across the locations. This was due to multiple reasons including *girls' harbouring apprehensions regarding coming to the centres and being able to cope with the academic inputs *limited parental interest and support for attending the centres *being engaged in seasonal work with family members *undertaking household tasks, caring for siblings etc.

Team members made repeated home visits, especially for girls who were irregular, and engaged with the parents. Sometimes, they faced sharp, hostile reactions. But they did not give up. In West Singhbhum, team members began to attend the tribal Gram Sabha¹⁵ as well to highlight the importance of girls' education and benefits from joining the Balika Shivar.

Other challenges also cropped up. There were numerous instances of people passing comments

Meanwhile, the Bikaner team also reached out to schools in the intervention blocks and asked them to share information about girls who were currently struggling with academics in Class X. They were more likely to drop out as well. A list of about 110 girls was obtained. They were contacted and encouraged to enrol in the nearest Balika Shivar. This strategy helped reach the target of 300 girls for the first year as well. The team, with the active support of girls, devised ways of boosting attendance as well.

Understanding Them Better

As the interactions with the girls and young women grew, teachers and other team members gained vital insights into their lives. The **vast and intricate roots of gendered discrimination became evident**. These insights were crucial in shaping the components – academic and others - as well. For instance, in Rajasthan, girls' names often concretised the notion that they were unwanted.

¹⁴In Udaipur, rent was paid initially for four centres (about 23.21 – 29.35 USD per month and electricity charges). This was later waived off by the local communities.

¹⁵The tribal Gram Sabha represents a customary practice for decision making and self-governance. These are presided by traditional leaders.

¹⁶The Pradhan heads the Gram Panchayat. Overall, the rural local self government system (Panchayati Raj Institutions) comprise three levels – Gram Panchayat (closest to communities, typically includes a select number of villages), Panchayat Samiti (at the block level) and Zilla Parishad (district level). The panchayat pradhan is also known as sarpanch or mukhiya (the latter term is more common in Jharkhand).

Thus, they were named Baskari, Itishree, Aanchuki typically meaning no more needed or the last one. Certain communities in Bikaner also had a specific socio-cultural custom known as **Aata – Sata**. This involved reciprocity in marital ties between two

families – a matrimonial barter system - that also deepened vulnerabilities for girls and young women. In Udaipur, **elopement and living together** were common practices among certain tribes. This had significant implications as well.

Bikaner

Aata – Sata refers to an arrangement between two families wherein they exchange brides for their sons. Girls as young as 15 years could be married off to uphold the arrangement. Moreover, any fissure or problems in one relationship invariably affected the other. Thus, if one girl came back or was made to leave by a family, the other would retaliate in a similar manner. The girls and young women involved would have no say. Familial pride would take precedence over their wellbeing. Reconciliations are typically rare and multiple lives would be wrecked.

Udaipur

Girls could elope with a partner. If there are no problems/opposition, then the girl's family could also claim bride price from the boy's family. This could be as high as Rs 3-5 lakh (3504.67 – 5841.12 USD). However, if the girl is unable to stay, the boy's family could even claim double the money as compensation. There are instances of girls being lured by married men. Both these practices invariably disrupted education. Besides the considerable adverse effects of early pregnancies, girls often remained at a significant disadvantage in their new families with very limited decision-making abilities.

Sometimes, **women also internalised and perpetuated patriarchal norms and restrictions**. There were instances of mother in laws preventing their daughter in laws from attending the Balika Shivar. Some even incited their sons stating that such engagements would eventually lead to the women leaving them! Clearly, too often, girls and women led rigidly controlled lives. This was particularly true for Rajasthan.

Jharkhand provided a more varied picture. Gendered restrictions, though present to some extent, appeared to be less rigid. However, girls still bore a disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities. For instance, they were more likely to be entrusted with caring for sick parents and relatives and asked to prioritise this over going to school. Adolescent girls were also sometimes engaged in work. Parents often supported such engagement even when it compromised the girls' education. The prospect of daily wages, more so among the deprived communities, held greater significance.



There was another significant concern. It became increasingly obvious that an **overwhelming majority of the girls did not have the learning level of the last class passed**. For instance, a girl may have passed class VIII, but she was unable to read a sentence in Hindi. There were few who could read a paragraph, but struggled to share the essence of what they had read. Here, inadequate familiarity/discomfort with Hindi as well as lack of comprehension skill were possibly at play. This insight was further reaffirmed when ASER assessment tool was used for conducting baseline assessment in year 2.

Across both states, local languages exerted a pervasive influence as well. For most, **Hindi was their second language, and one that many were not familiar or comfortable with**. This was particularly true in West Singhbhum where the girls spoke Ho. In Udaipur, this also meant that the girls carried their Wagdi (local language) spelling and pronunciation into Hindi as well. They would invariably make certain spelling mistakes ('ch' would become 's' and 's' become 'h'). Having local teachers helped. However, it was evident that considerable time would be needed to help the girls reach a level of writing all their papers in Hindi.

An unexpected challenge cropped up as well. It was found that **many girls in Rajasthan had been assigned subjects by the E-Mitras!** Basically, the E-Mitras had selected the subjects while filling the forms without consulting the girls. Or, they had a cursory conversation and the girls had agreed without thinking of the implications. The teams had to discuss this at length with the girls and determine if they were comfortable and could pass the exams for these subjects. In many cases, **girls wanted to change the subjects**. The teams then had to follow up for this as well.

Converging Strengths

During October – November 2022, formal project launch meetings were held across the four districts.

The teams engaged with the district administrations and planned the meetings together. The District Collectors sent invitations to all key frontline department functionaries including education, health and family welfare, ICDS, DCPU, agriculture, civil development etc. The DC chaired the meetings as well. This concretised the project's intention of fostering convergence with systemic actors and facilitating collective actions for second chance education and vocational training (and livelihoods) for women. The presentation made by Plan India and discussions during the meetings explored and reaffirmed alignment of priorities (between the project and districts). Roles and expected contributions from the district administration and key departments and Plan India were also finalised collectively. Further, the DCs appointed a Nodal Officer to ensure coordination and provide oversight for the project. The visible involvement of the DCs boosted the credibility and acceptance of the project.



Subsequently, block level launch meetings/ orientations were also held wherein BDOs took the lead. The participants included block level representatives of key departments as well as PRI representatives from GP and Panchayat Samiti levels. These district and block launch meetings proved to be a significant milestone and paved the way for subsequent collaborative efforts. For instance, DCs issued letters to the DEOs for supporting the project.

A Joyful Start

Meanwhile, the teams took a conscious decision to prioritise cultural activities and sports over the academic component at the centres for the initial period. This would help draw more girls and young women and was also linked to the larger intent of making Balika Shivar a welcoming space for them. Thus, the teams encouraged girls to sing, play *Antakshari* (a game using songs) and dance. Sports was prioritised as well. There were indoor games (carrom, ludo, skipping rope). Badminton, flying disc (frisbee), football and kabaddi were also encouraged.

The **girls' involvement in football** gradually deepened, particularly in the second year. Essentially, girls were encouraged to form teams and provided inputs regarding the game. They began participating in competitions between Balika Shivar wearing shirts and pants. In most locations, particularly in Rajasthan, this was an unfamiliar sight. The girls braved adverse reactions and stood their ground. Soon, some teams began winning competitions as well. The girls' determination and persistence proved to be the most fitting

response for those who doubted them. In fact, this engagement proved to be a significant catalyst for change.

The **cultural and sports activities helped enhance interactions between the girls and with the teachers as well**. It increased attendance at the centres. Most importantly, the activities helped create a warm and supportive environment at the centres that helped the subsequent introduction of the academic component as well. The activities also helped increase attendance at the centres.

Meanwhile, girls were provided with **education kits** on National Girl Child Day on January 23, 2024. This included school bag, water bottle, hard board, notebooks, pencil box, pen, pencils (including colour pencils), sharpener and eraser. It was now time to gradually foray into the academic component. The girls also received woollen garments for protection from the extreme cold.

Getting into The Curriculum

Overall, the Balika Shivar focused on Indian Culture and Heritage, Home Science, Hindi, Painting and Yoga as subjects for class X. For class XII, Sociology was also included. Initially, the girls and young women were given a sample question paper from NIOS which could serve as a common baseline. Almost all students struggled to respond! They were then given a blank sheet and asked to write in Hindi. They were suggested prompts – for instance, they could write about their village. Those who could not do so, could write the alphabets. Many found this difficult as well. For instance, almost 300 out of the 324 students in West Singhbhum struggled to write complete sentences in Hindi. They were then encouraged to draw. The teachers did not want them to feel disheartened and so encouraged them to express themselves in whichever way they could. Nonetheless, across the four districts, these first sheets became the baseline and the first entry in their personal files.

The teachers utilised the inputs gained from a training on teaching methodologies. Using lesson plans as well as methods such as flash cards proved to be useful for them. Quizzes also helped generate interest. Further, 315 girls who attended



“Once girls cross 12-13 years, they are not expected to be seen playing outside. But boys can play. We enjoyed playing football. We are very happy we got this opportunity.”

(Girls at a Balika Shivar in Udaipur)

“Initially, we also had some doubts. Neighbours made fun of us. But we said – isn't this what you wear when you play sports? Then, we came back with the trophy and everyone was very impressed.”

(Girls at a Balika Shivar in Bikaner)

“We formed our football team. We came first and we got medals. People were very surprised.”

(Girls at a Balika Shivar in Hazaribagh)



Balika Shivar regularly were felicitated. This aimed at highlighting them as examples to inspire others as well.

For Holistic Development

By early 2023, another vital component was added at the Balika Shivar - **Socio Emotional Learning (SEL)**. A consultant reviewed existing materials and aids and developed a SEL Manual for Balika Shivar. Forty five team members underwent three-day Training of Trainer (ToT) on SEL in two batches. The training helped them familiarise themselves with the content areas and the participatory and

Socio Emotional Learning: An Overview

Self awareness, self-management, decision making, relationship skills as well as social awareness constitute the key foundational elements for SEL. These elements were translated into 24 sessions/chapters in the SEL Manual covering a range of vital themes. This included self confidence, assertiveness, emotional regulation, practicing compassion, active listening, communication, collaboration, creative thinking, growth mindset and identifying solutions. Lesson plans with accessible activities were outlined for each. The journey with the SEL sessions was expected to help the girls and young women gain a better understanding of themselves, their strengths and emotions; grow with interpersonal skills and carve out better futures for themselves with improved decision making. It would also help create a supportive, caring and inclusive learning environment at the Balika Shivar

Significantly, SEL has been recognised under the Government of India's National Education Policy 2020 as well.

accessible activities and tools devised for the same. It was important for the teachers to understand the relevance and value of SEL wherein they could encourage the girls and young women to see themselves as actors with agency rather than victims or passive witnesses in their own lives. This acknowledgment was an important prerequisite for their educational journeys as well. Moreover, the teachers needed to take on the roles of mentors and allies, supporting the girls and young women as needed.

SEL implementation was initiated in the Balika Shivirs in Jharkhand in April 2023. The roll out in Rajasthan was slightly delayed due to the RSOS examination



A range of benefits soon began to be visible in terms of the body language, expression and engagement between the girls and young women and the teachers. There were collateral benefits for academics as well. As the girls grew in confidence and realised their own value and talents, they were less likely to feel intimidated by peers who had studied more than them or did better. Mutual bonding was enhanced which, in turn, supported the group learning processes. *(see section on results for more).*

For Improved Learning

During April 2023, 35 teachers and 8 cluster coordinators received further training on use of **Alternate Learning Method (ALM)** – an innovative pedagogy that was suited to second chance education. A consultant reviewed existing ALMs and other related resources. She then developed manuals for the five subjects (Indian Culture and Heritage, Home Science, Hindi, Painting and Yoga) under NIOS through a consultative process involving the project teams.

Alternate Learning Method: An Overview

ALM offers a structured, responsive, learner centric approach that is more accessible and engaging than traditional teaching learning processes. It provides interactive tools/ aids that can help those who are lagging in learning levels to pick up key concepts faster. It essentially **ensures teaching at the right level**.

Five manuals were prepared for the subjects under NIOS. Key teaching approaches and methods outlined included group-based learning, beginning chapters with questions, extensive use of Teaching Learning Materials (TLMs) including visual aids and providing appreciation. Overall, activity-based learning was prioritised so that the girls did not remain passive listeners. This was also aligned with another priority – project-based learning. Here, the girls and young women were encouraged to build models etc related to various themes (e.g., pollution, step farming etc). Story telling was used extensively. Exposure visits were undertaken to sites of educational value. Considering that Hindi was the second language for many Balika Shivar participants, there was also a consistent emphasis on helping the students become familiar with difficult Hindi words in the texts. These were underlined and discussed together.



Key chapters were also converted into audio visual stories. This process involved selection of appropriate sections and sharing these with a consultant who wrote scripts. The scripts were then reviewed and finalised with feedback from a technical group comprising programme manager, cluster coordinators and select teachers from the four locations. The consultant developed and finalised the videos which included animation aspect as well. Feedback was taken from girls at Balika Shivar in Bikaner and Hazaribagh as well. The stories were played on tabs provided at the centres. The stories proved to be a big hit with the girls.

Overall, teachers sought to make all the girls and young women feel comfortable, to encourage them to ask questions and seek clarifications if they did not understand. It was important that they overcame their hesitation and spoke. Gradually, the use of ALM began to yield results. Also, the growing cumulative effects of SEL and ALM could be discerned in the Sakhi Sangam groups anchored to the Balika Shivirs as they began to discuss, identify and act on their concerns (*see section on Results for more; also see chapter 4*).

Reaching Out

While engagement of girls and young women with the Balika Shivirs grew, there was a particular concern that persisted. Regular attendance remained problematic for girls who lived at a distance from the centres. For instance, it was found that 110 girls in Udaipur lived more than 10 km away from the closest Balika Shivir. This prompted reflection and a solution was found – study circles initiated in February-March 2023.

Two male teachers who could cover significant distances were recruited. They covered a fixed number of girls who lived close by and could come together in one of their houses (and thus form one study circle). The location of meeting was decided

on rotational basis. Besides educational inputs, the male teachers were specially briefed on Plan India's Safeguarding Policy. Moreover, the project coordinator remained in regular touch with them as well as the girls and their families to ensure that the study circle functioned smoothly and there were no concerns.

Thus, the **study circles** brought education to the girls' doorstep. The teachers also began to understand the specific situations better and tailor inputs for the girls accordingly. However, the girls did miss out on the range of other (non-academic) inputs and interactions that occurred at the Balika Shivir. Nonetheless, this strategy proved to be an important breakthrough in reaching girls in more remote locations. It was subsequently used in other districts with scattered populations as well.



The First Exam Experience

April - June 2023 proved to be exciting and nerve wracking as the girls and young women gave the NIOS and RSOS exams. The teams helped the girls with the related formalities. Transport facilities were arranged and the related costs were covered by the project. And then, new problems cropped up. Few parents or other family members suddenly backed out and stated that their daughters would not give the exams. In one instance in Bikaner, the girl's brother opposed it. The mother, however, was supportive. The teacher and cluster coordinator

made repeated visits. They also encouraged the mother to speak to the son. The efforts bore fruit and the girl could give the exam.

Meanwhile, in Udaipur, seven girls eloped. This was a huge setback. The team began contacting the girls and their families. Numbers of their partners were obtained. Teachers and cluster coordinators reached out to the couples. The aim was to convince the girls to give the exams. These efforts were successful and the seven girls returned to give the exams. In most cases, their partners brought them.

Komal had eloped with a boy she liked. Initially, she was unsure about giving the RSOS exams. But she was eventually convinced and returned to do so. She cleared the class X exam. Meanwhile, her relationship with the boy ended and she came back home. She was welcomed back at the centre. She is keen to sit for the class XII exam. She now has new aspirations and dreams. "I want to be police," she declares in a quiet, confident voice.

A Continuum of Success and Change

It was heartening to note that 512 girls who cleared their class X and XII examinations from Open School subsequently joined regular schools and colleges to continue their education. Among them, 13 girls began computer classes and paid the related fees/charges themselves. Across the four locations, those who passed grew as role models. Many of them also returned to the Balika Shivar later to share their experiences and encourage the subsequent batch to dream about possible futures.

The teams had to stay attentive and resolve any emerging apprehensions and concerns promptly. As the exams began, a common complaint was that girls reached home late. Some parents would then say that the girls would not be allowed to give the next exam. Here, the teams had to explain that they followed specific routes to pick up and drop several girls. This meant that those who lived further away reached home later.

Another significant challenge had to be overcome. NIOS used OMR answer sheets i.e., Optical Mark Recognition wherein responses had to be marked in specific ways to enable automated processing. The girls had never marked on such sheets and made multiple mistakes that cost them dearly. The teams had to undertake multiple sessions to familiarise the girls with filling OMR sheets.

The results gave much to celebrate. A satisfactory 53% of the Balika Shivar girls and young women qualified all the five subjects for NIOS and RSOS. This was higher than the proposed target. The top scorers in Bikaner achieved 76.2%, 70.4 % and 70.2%. In Udaipur, they reached 80%, 71% and 68%. The three toppers in Hazaribagh obtaining 76%, 74% and 72% while in West Singhbhum the equivalent scores were 77.6%, 72.2% and 67.8%.

Further, in Bikaner, 76.71% of the girls who had appeared passed the exams. This figure stood at 61.51% for Udaipur. Moreover, in numerous cases, family members accompanied the girls in collecting marksheets from the AI centres. This also created a positive buzz here as well as in Jharkhand.



However, the pass percentages for Jharkhand were comparatively lower. Hazaribagh stood at 47.5%. West Singhbhum fared poorly with 9%. At both locations, and more so in West Singhbhum, language proved to be a major stumbling block. The tribal girls spoke their native/local languages and were not comfortable in Hindi. While the Balika Shivar had made substantial efforts, it was difficult to get many of them to a level of reading, understanding and responding to the questions papers in Hindi within a short span of five to six months. In West Singhbhum, a sizeable number had been unfamiliar with Hindi alphabets! There were substantial educational deficits as well, particularly for those who had spent considerable time out of classrooms.

Taking Stock

The exam results led to an extensive internal review as well. Initial learning levels of the girls, teachers' capacities and the inputs they provided, processes of weekly tests and ongoing monitoring of the students' performances and other aspects of the teaching learning processes were discussed. Specific strategies were prioritised. This included greater engagement with parents/family members to enhance support for their daughters/wives' education, greater stress on joyful learning, regularising project based learning and enhanced inputs and supportive supervision for teachers. There was a special focus on West Singhbhum since it was clear that it needed separate/additional treatment. It was decided to stop further enrolment here, focus on the existing batch and help them clear class X and XII exams in the subsequent project years.

Teachers' capacity building efforts were stepped up. Teachers from Hazaribagh and West Singhbhum began to meet online every Saturday. They were entrusted specific chapters to prepare and then facilitate the related session for the group. It was also decided that papers from internal tests at a centre would be checked by a teacher from another centre.

Further, inputs on foundational literacy were stepped up for the students, particularly in West Singhbhum. There was also a greater stress on participatory approaches. Teachers were encouraged to take more time with group processes and other ALM tools here.

Deepening Ties

Interactions with parents, panchayats and other community members were stepped up. This included **engagements with parents/other family members** through house visits, especially for girls whose attendance was irregular or faced other challenges at a family level. Sakhi Sangam, initiated at the centres in the first year, played an important role here. These were essentially groups of girls attendings Balika Shivar and those who had passed out as well as women from the local communities.

Key frontline workers such as ASHA, Anganwadi Worker and others were also roped in. The groups helped amplify the importance of girls' education, particularly second chance education. They also countered myths and misconceptions related to NIOS and RSOS. They followed up with individual girls and their families as well.



“

“I want my daughter-in-law to study. I am happy she comes here (to the centre). It will help her and the family. I don't really bother with what other people think or say.”

(Father-in-law; his daughter-in-law attends Makdadev Balika Shivar in Udaipur)

”

Male role models from the girls and young women's families were identified and encouraged. It was particularly important to highlight contributions of supportive men (fathers, brothers, husbands and father in laws) that could serve as an example for their peers.

Further, the **panchayat pradhans, munda¹⁷ and other key community members** were often invited to visit the Balika Shivar. This practice, initiated from year one, was consciously promoted. There were numerous instances of Sakhi Sangams engaging with panchayats and securing funds and other support for renovating of Balika Shivar, constructing boundary walls, ensuring electricity etc (see *chapter 4 for more*).

¹⁷ *Mundas* are traditional leaders in tribal societies in Jharkhand. They predate the PRI system and yield considerable power.

Widening Circles of Engagement

Meanwhile, 1395 girls and young women were enrolled at the Balika Shivar in the second year during July-August 2023. This figure further rose to 1927 by January-February 2024. The number of blocks covered was increased in Hazaribagh. Besides Churchu and Daru, parts of Tatijhariya and Sadar were included. This was essentially driven by the block saturation concept wherein the project took up additional blocks when the number of drop out girls in the existing ones were already covered. [Such additions occurred in the third year as well with Gogunda in Udaipur and Ichak in Hazaribagh.]

In the second year, the number centres grew to 62. Moreover, there were 26 study circles in Rajasthan and Jharkhand. The increase in number of centres and students was fuelled by demand from the local communities and the need to expand intervention areas due to dispersed population. Significantly, a growing number of girls who had enrolled in the first year became vocal supporters and helped mobilise enrolment as well. Razia Bano, for instance, mobilised other girls from her community in Bikaner. This proved to be of significant help. The local Ustha community were primarily engaged in stone mining. They were also renowned artisans involved in stone sculpting. Education more so for girls and women was, often, not a priority.



“I had been part of a study circle. I liked it. I wanted my sisters and other girls to join. Then, when I heard about a centre being opened, I was very happy. I helped Ma'm (teacher) connect with 20 girls.”

(Razia Bano, supported establishing Balika Shivar in a location in Bikaner)



The teams had also gained greater familiarity with NIOS and RSOS. Further, the awareness activities undertaken for RSOS and NIOS were appreciated by the functionaries at their centres. **Working relationships were strengthened for most NIOS and RSOS centres. The ties with education**

department functionaries, particularly at the block level, also deepened. The BEO in Udaipur was appreciative of the emphasis on helping married girls and young women return to education.

A New Challenge

Just as the teams in Rajasthan had begun to work at a comfortable pace, a new development created new problems. RSOS announced that all candidates needed to obtain a Single Sign On Identification Number – i.e., **SSOID**. This ID number enabled them to access a range of services and options from the RSOS website (including getting admit card, marksheet etc). It was also important for accessing online materials and receive marks for online attendance. SSOID was obtained through an online process that included submission and verification of multiple documents. OTPs were sent to a registered mobile number for each step. This created confusion and parents often did not understand/were wary of sharing the OTP. In many cases, they had stopped using that number or the phone would not have requisite recharge (and, therefore, be unusable) when needed.

The teams had to maintain sustained contact and follow up with the parents and the emitras to ensure that the steps were completed. It became very difficult to ensure SSOIDs for all the girls at the centres and time was running out! Sakhi Sangam groups in Bikaner took up this issue and their advocacy efforts resulted in an extension of the time period (*see chapter 4 for more*).

For a Better Understanding

In many ways, the project stood on firmer ground in the second year. The ASER evaluation tool¹⁸ was now used to understand the learning levels of the children at the beginning of the session. Here, students were categorised based on their competencies at word, sentence, paragraph and story (7-10 sentences) levels. Teachers were then

¹⁸ Used widely in India to capture foundational literacy and numeracy levels of learners

better prepared to customise inputs and guide the girls and young women. As mentioned earlier, this included a substantial focus on foundational literacy, particularly in West Singhbhum.



There was also now greater clarity on the teaching learning processes. By November 2023, six trainings comprising of three days each on accelerated learning techniques was completed for 77 project staff. Supportive supervision of teachers was continued. Significantly, several teachers had also grown with experience and were even better placed to support each other. Thus, select teachers from Hazaribagh provided inputs to their counterparts in West Singhbhum. They were recognised as master trainers. In fact, as the project progressed, there was a definitive shift towards greater utilisation of internal resources (with reduced involvement of external consultants wherever considered appropriate).

Stepping Up with Other Inputs

Monthly tests were continued across the four districts. Further, the teams collated and used past examination papers to help prepare the girls and young women. In Rajasthan, this was known as one week series. Where this was not readily available (i.e., in Jharkhand), the teams shortlisted the common questions for sharing. In fact, the teachers were first asked to write the answers so that they would have greater clarity when supporting the students. Further, during June 2024, mock exams were conducted for the girls of Balika shivir in the pattern of RSOS exam to help familiarise them. The teams also continued to guide the girls and young women with preparing their practical files. This formed a small but critical component that was graded as well.

Motivational films were screened to encourage the girls and young women. The Parent Teachers

Meetings at the Balika Shivirs were also continued. These meetings aided discussions on the important role of parents/family members in supporting the girls' educational journeys. Other vital aspects – including concerns such as child marriage and gendered norms that constrained girls – were also broached sensitively.

Expanding Exposure

The project also provided multiple opportunities and platforms for the girls and young women at the Balika Shivir. Thus, more than 7,000 of them across the four districts participated in the **celebration of special days** such as the International day of Girl Child, National Girl Child Day, Children's Day and Menstrual Hygiene Day during the second year of the project. These became regular features across the project period and also provided important spaces for interaction with key stakeholders. For instance, girls at a Balika Shivir used Gandhi Jayanti as an occasion to speak to the panchayat pradhan and seek renovations for their centre. Their efforts were successful (*see chapter 4 for more*). Visits to museums and other sites of interest were increasingly incorporated as well. Accordingly, 185 girls visited the Ganga Government museum in Bikaner in the second year. In the third year, girls from Hazaribagh visited Bodh Gaya. These visits helped them connect with key concepts within the Indian Culture subject in a more accessible manner.

Also, a **range of other interactions and visits** to key panchayat and government functionaries as well as police stations were undertaken as part of the Sakhi Sangam component. **The emphasis on sports** was also stepped up. In many ways, this was also organic. Sixteen girls' football teams emerged across the two states. **The role of football as a catalyst of change** has been highlighted earlier. Further, in the third year, a two-day sports event was organised in Udaipur. Ninety six girls from six Balika Shivir competed in sports such as kho-kho, kabaddi, and volleyball. This was an important milestone. It helped generate significant interest among the girls, their families and communities. It also helped the girls grow in confidence as well as strengthen their understanding of the importance of team work.

Gaining Recognition

Further, the District Collector of Hazaribagh, Ms. Nancy Sahay, awarded four girls who had prevented child marriages and mainstreamed drop out girls in schools on International Women's Day on March 8, 2024. The girls, who were Sakhi Sangam leaders, were given a certificate and Rs 2,500 each. Further, the district administration also felicitated girls who had secured above 70% in the NIOS exam. The



girls were given medals and certificates. In West Singhbhum, the district administration felicitated two girls who had the highest marks (with 78% and 66%). Such recognitions were possible in the third year of the project as well and helped enhance interest and momentum in second chance education initiatives in the districts. Further, two project review and planning meetings were held in close coordination with the district administrations of Hazaribagh and West Singhbhum.

Supporting with Essentials

During May – June 2024, as the mercury soared across the four districts, umbrellas and water bottles (heat wave related equipment) were distributed to the girls across all the Balika Shivirs. Earlier, 790 girls in Bikaner were provided with winter essentials.



Lending a Supporting Hand

The project incorporated a vibrant volunteer engagement component as well. This was driven by Z Zurich's interest in providing meaningful online spaces of engagement for staff that would be mutually beneficial for them and girls and young women at the Balika Shivar. From the second year onwards, these interactions became more structured. The session plans were designed in accordance with the NIOS and RSOS curriculum to help the girls and young women draw direct benefits. These were shared with volunteers beforehand. They were also encouraged to use visual aids and make the sessions more engaging. Moreover, pre and post test assessments were done (at the beginning and end of the sessions) with the girls and young women.

Enhancing Access

Girls had shared about challenges faced in an interaction with Z Zurich Foundation volunteer. Many of them had to travel 5 -10 km to reach the Balika Shivar. This spurred the volunteer to raise funds that were then used to provide bicycles to 206 girls. The selection process was transparent and included discussions in the Balika Shivar. This initiative was greatly appreciated by the girls and their family members.





“My daughter got a cycle from the centre. This has been very useful and she can come to the centre more easily.”

(Father of a girl who studies at a Balika Shivar in Udaipur)



were voluntary engagements as well. But they made a crucial difference. For instance, interactions with police personnel – particularly women personnel – helped some girls to dream a new dream of joining the police force (*see chapter 5 for more on volunteer engagement*). These also led to career counselling sessions. For instance, 150 Balika Shivar girls participated in three sessions in Bikaner and Udaipur during September – December 2024. Twenty girls began to prepare for exams for teaching and police.

Bringing Families Closer

The emphasis on working with parents/guardians and other family members had been gradually enhanced during the project. After all, this engagement was essential for ensuring that girls and young women could come to the Balika Shivar and work towards qualifying class X and XII examinations. At a more fundamental level, family buy-in was critical for changing the narrative, for giving girls and young women the opportunity to exercise agency and grow in terms of education and otherwise. For this, the parents first needed to truly recognise and understand their daughters. Taking the SEL component to the parents was an important, conscious step in this direction.

In **Hazaribagh**, meetings with parents began to incorporate questions regarding their daughters’ likes and dislikes, number and names of her friends, interests and aspirations. Often, they struggled to answer such questions. The project teams built on these experiences to encourage the parents to connect with and talk to their daughters. The meetings became important spaces for sharing, and, sometimes, even catharsis as some parents realised the emotional distances between them. The meetings, typically planned strategically for Balika Shivar where parental involvement was low/marked resistance to girls’ education, became triggers for much needed conversations.



Further, girls from the local communities who were in college also grew as an important support. This included girls who had qualified class XII through Balika Shivar. They—commonly referred to as graduate girls—contributed with inputs for specific subjects as drawing, yoga etc and supported the teachers as well. They were initially screened by the project teams to check their understanding of the concerned subjects. They were also oriented on Plan’s Safeguarding Policy. At many locations, they grew as vibrant and vocal members of Sakhi Sangams too.

As the project progressed, several local stakeholders also engaged with the Balika Shivar students and the broader Sakhi Sangams. These

For Financial Independence

Meanwhile, financial literacy inputs were also provided to the girls and young women at the Balika Shivar across the four districts through structured sessions. They were able to learn and discuss about expenditure (essential and non-essential), importance of saving, opening and managing bank accounts. Various banking related services were also touched upon. Understanding risks and financial planning was covered. Inputs on various government schemes was also integrated in these trainings. Moreover, the project helped open 128 bank accounts (see chapter 3 as well).



Growing with Insight

In many ways, the evolving experiences with RSOS and NIOS, particularly performance in the exams, held valuable insights. The RSOS results for the second year were declared in September 2024. The pass percentage for Bikaner and Udaipur stood at 69.2% and 52 % respectively. Meanwhile, in Jharkhand, the results showed a significant improvement for West Singhbhum where the pass percentage rose from 9% to 30%. Hazaribagh remained more or less at the same level. An analysis of the results, particularly for those who had failed, provided further inputs for subsequent programming. Specific trainings were conducted for the teachers. This included an emphasis on accelerated learning and refresher trainings in Bikaner and Hazaribagh in December 2024. The

Reasons for Failing in Open School Exams

1. Unable to answer questions and low writing speed in Hindi
2. Got sick during the exam period
3. Could not prepare properly due to family/work/other issues
4. Migrated and hence not present for exam
5. Others (absent due to marriage in the family, was pregnant and gave birth...)

[Compiled from data analysis of four districts]

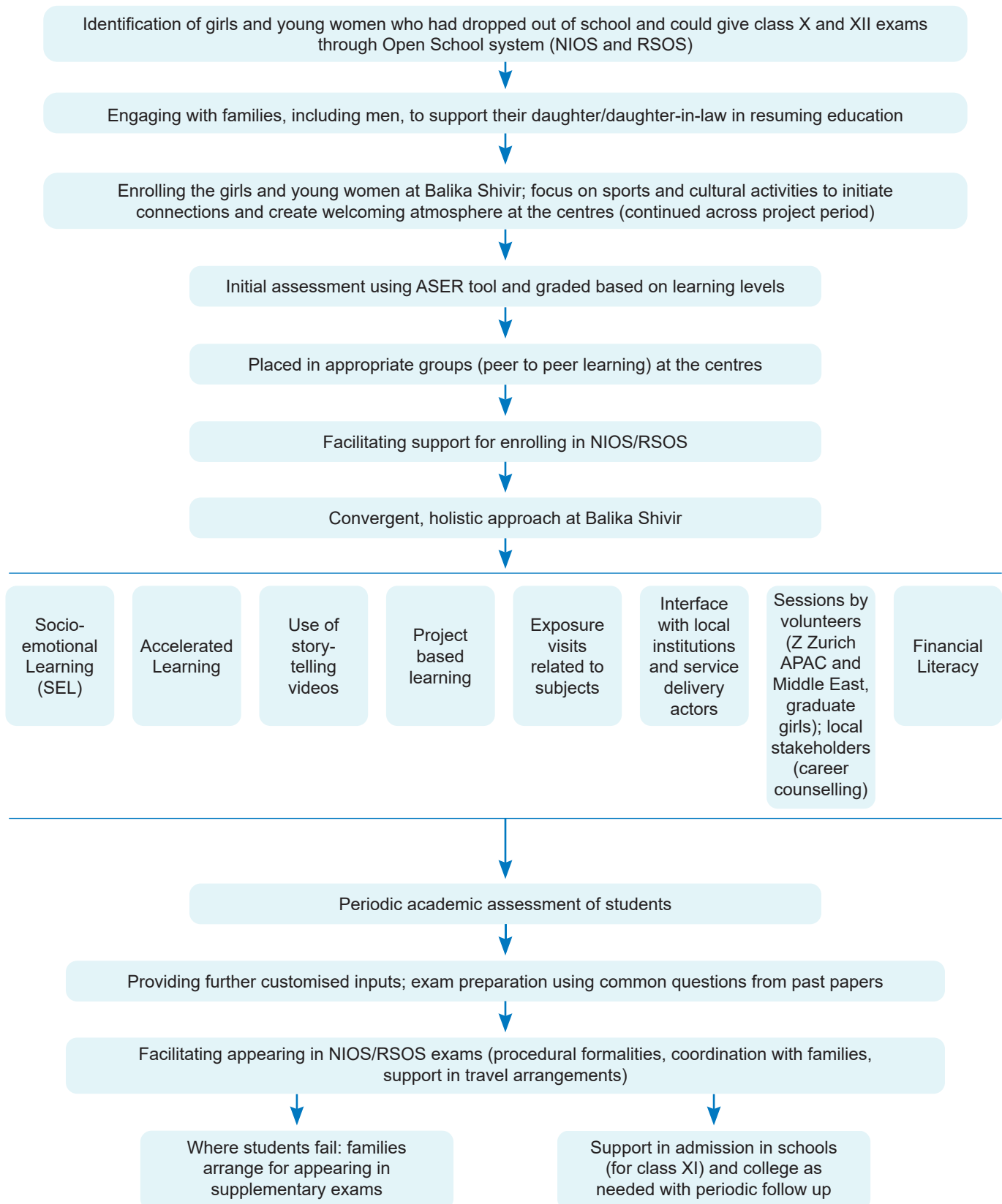
focus on customised lesson plans and writing in Hindi was increased. Supportive supervision was strengthened. New teachers, were oriented, after they joined including in West Singhbhum.

Substantial Gains

As the third year of the project began to inch its way towards closure, there was a palpable sense of change. Balika Shivar had helped in many ways and across multiple domains – in the internal and external worlds of the girls and young women, in triggering processes of dialogue and actions led by Sakhi Sangams anchored at the centres, for many volunteers who stepped up and for the teachers who grew with their own journeys of engagement. The academic progress became a piece within this larger canvas.

And it was an important piece too considering the personal and societal barriers and educational deficits that needed to be countered. Each girl and young woman who decided to join the centre, who chose to attend and participate regularly, who sat for exams and then those who qualified – all of them were already champions for themselves. Some, of course, could grow into even bigger leadership roles. For all of them, life would never be the same.

Process Pathway: Balika Shivar



Results

Providing a second chance at education:

The Balika Shivar grew as vibrant centres with increasing enrolment. The project helped 4441 girls and young women who had dropped out to return to education. This included an appreciable number of married young women (724) across the four districts.

Girls and young women joined mainstream schools and colleges:

In all, 936 girls and young women across locations joined regular/mainstream schools (for classes XI -XII) and college. This was a significant positive outcome of the project.

Contributed to increased enrolments for open school:

The project helped create awareness about NIOS and RSOS in the communities and spurred enrolments. This is reflected in the data provided below:

Location	Enrolments in 2022-23	Enrolments in 2023-24	Enrolment in 2024-25
Bikaner – Kolayet AI Centre	6	357 (Plan India facilitated 212)	394 (Plan India facilitated 230)
Bikaner – Lunkaransar	325	550 (Plan India facilitated 215)	670 (Plan India facilitated 260)
Udaipur – Jhadol	520	563	762

Overcoming Odds

Roopa's father worked as a daily labourer to support the family which included her and four siblings. The family, residing in Udaipur, placed Roopa and her sister in an orphanage so that they could lead stable lives. She studied till class VII there. She could complete class VIII after returning home, but had to drop out after that. She was married and became a mother soon after. While she was still keen, her in-laws did not want her to study. She was overjoyed when she came to know about Balika Shivar. Despite family objections, she joined. Fortunately, her husband was favourably disposed. She became an active learner and participant in various activities at the Balika Shivar. She passed class X exam with 60.60%. She wanted to join a regular government school and clear class XII. Her in-laws protested. Her husband stood by her as she took the difficult decision to move out and stay in a rented room and join school. "We have to think for ourselves. This is about our own lives," she affirmed with deep conviction. "I now want to study and become a teacher," she added.

““

“We had the second highest admissions among 700 centres in the state and our school was felicitated. Plan has also helped in this. Our aim is essentially the same.”

(Rakesh Benewal, Lunkaransar AI Centre In Charge)

””

There was another collateral benefit. While the project focused on girls, the awareness activities triggered enrolment among boys as well. For instance, 141 boys in Udaipur enrolled under RSOS. The project’s efforts were appreciated by the AI functionaries as well.

An impressive array of changes within themselves, families and communities: There was a rich tapestry of changes experienced by the girls and women in their internal and external worlds. These impacted their families as well. Some trickles of change began to influence broader community perspectives. Some of these key changes, as expressed by the girls and young women, are consolidated below.

Changes Experienced

““

Our Families

“Boys can just say– I am going – and go anywhere. We have to take permission. But now, families also allow us to go out more.”

“We are now seen as more capable. They feel we can do something.”

“I talk more with my parents. My mother also listens to me more. Earlier, she would believe anything that anybody would say. Now, she comes and checks with me first. There is more trust.”

“My father made tea for me when I was studying. This had never happened before.”

””

Changes Experienced

““

Our Communities

“Change is happening. More parents and other people are aware of the importance of educating girls and preventing child marriage.”

“Initially, many people passed comments when we played football and dressed in shirt and shorts. But then, we didn’t care. Then they also began to accept.”

””

A deep interest in education sparked even for those who did not continue educational journeys: Teams, across the four locations, shared multiple affirming instances of girls and young women who stayed in touch with them. Some had travelled to other locations in the country for work, but would call often to ask about the results. The teachers knew that their time at the Balika Shivirs had changed them and they would carry what they had learned. Many of them had, in their own ways, become proponents for girls’ education including second chance education.

““

“One girl had gone to Tamil Nadu for work. She used to call often. When she heard that she had passed, she began crying on the phone. I will never forget that.”

(Teacher, West Singhbhum)

””

Balika Shivir as a composite model: The project helped develop a comprehensive understanding of the essential requirements for making second chance education an achievable reality. Balika Shivir became the site for a unique, pedagogical model that integrated teaching at the right level (inspired pedagogy), accelerated learning, socio-emotional learning and use of digital aids (e.g., story telling through tabs).

Living an Alternative Pedagogy

The teaching learning processes at Balika Shivar were initiated with the use of ASER tool for individual assessments. Here, the girls and young women were graded in terms of competency at word, sentence, paragraph and story levels. Besides writing, other crucial skills such as reading, listening and comprehension were also ascertained. Another vital dimension was noted. This was in terms of the last class attended as well as duration of being out of school. These aspects were interlinked and shaped the students' current status. It also aided a deeper understanding of educational deficits including where the last class passed and expected competencies did not match, e.g., a student could have passed class VI, but struggled to write a sentence in Hindi.

These assessments were used to grade the students. The teachers then used accelerated learning techniques including providing inputs to the girls and young women in groups (as per the grading). Girls and young women at a particular stage were also mixed with those at the next higher level. Thus, those who were at sentence level interacted with and learned from those at paragraph level. Periodic tests were conducted to check uptake of inputs provided. The girls and young women were moved to the next level accordingly.

Overall, Balika Shivar represented a unique, responsive model that ensured education at the right level. It incorporated financial literacy and career counselling inputs as well. Moreover, the project had shown that community ownership, including contributions, could be generated for second chance education. Balika Shivar proved to be a good practice that was replicable and scalable (see chapter 5 for more).

Insights Gained

Having an ally in the family made a difference:

Very often, the girls and young women were supported by specific family members who encouraged them to attend the Balika Shivar. This encouragement became even more vital where girls and young women were initially hesitant.

Mothers and grandmothers were cited as the most common allies for girls. As mentioned earlier, husbands, fathers and fathers-in-law also stepped up for many. Male role models were particularly needed to influence societal change. One participant mentioned that her brother-in-law had told her about Balika Shivar and had asked her to visit.

“

“My daughter had failed in one subject and had then dropped out of school. She wasn't very sure about coming to the centre also. I told her to go.”

(Mother of a daughter who eventually became an active participant in a Balika Shivar in Hazaribagh)

“My parents didn't want her (wife) to study. They said – she is married. What is the need? But I thought it was a good idea. It will help her. It will help the family. So, I brought her here.”

(Husband whose wife studies at a Balika Shivar in Udaipur)

”

Involvement of local stakeholders in supporting girls' education had short term and long-term benefits:

The project consciously fostered ties with local panchayats, mundas and other key community leaders. The role played by panchayats in providing spaces for Balika Shivirs has been mentioned before. This was an important, immediate and short-term result. At the same time, this engagement from the onset of the project laid the foundation of collaborative relationships where they felt valued and included. This also facilitated their support—sometimes explicit and sometimes tacit—when the

Sakhi Sangams began to take up various issues, particularly those with socio-cultural connotations such as preventing child marriage or speaking up against domestic abuse and alcoholism. Of course, the actual levels of support rendered varied.

Effectiveness of SEL: The SEL component had wide ranging benefits in terms of specific changes for the girls and young women as well as contributing to academic component as well. Some of these key changes/benefits are outlined below.

Benefits of SEL : What they shared

Girls and Young Women

“We were able to recognise ourselves better.”

“We began thinking more about others and also about ourselves.”

“Ma'm became like a friend. We could tell her what we were feeling. We could share with each other more.”

“We began to feel more confident. We did not hesitate like before.”

“I learned about determination. I learned that I have to fight for myself.”

Teachers

“Girls who were shy and avoided eye contact, began to look up. Many became more confident. They began to speak more.”

“There was an activity on recognising their strengths and talents. It was called ‘Meri Superpower’ (My Superpower). They were also encouraged to recognise their feelings and express them. These were all new and different experiences for them.”

“The sessions helped them to understand themselves, to look at problems and work towards finding solution.”

“They realised the importance of team work, of collaborating. It strengthened coordination and cooperation among themselves too.”

“They began thinking more about themselves, what they want, their futures.”

Realising the importance of treating everyone with respect and compassion and mutual bonding aided overturning of deeply entrenched caste biases as well. For instance, girls and young women in Bikaner never brought such biases into the Balika Shivirs. They shared educational materials and other resources freely among themselves. They drank water from the same containers.

Effectiveness of ALM: The use of ALM aided teachers and the students at Balika Shivar. It helped make the NIOS and RSOS curriculum more accessible and aided quicker uptake. Moreover, ALM helped ensure that students remained at the heart of the teaching learning processes. The benefits experienced are outlined below.

Benefits of ALM : What they shared



Girls and Young Women

“Studying in groups is good. It does not feel very heavy.”

“In the groups, we can all help each other.”

“We would be asked what we learned the next day.”

“I like using chart papers and making things, models.”

“We were encouraged to speak, to ask questions. This did not happen in schools.”

Teachers

“We were told that we should speak less and encourage them to speak more in 80:20 (i.e., 80 – children, 20 – teacher). We began lessons by asking a question to get them interested. These were good and kept them engaged.”

“We began with a recap session every day. This was useful.”

“Grouping children had many advantages. They could share and learn from each other. It was less intimidating. It increased emotional bonding between them as well.

We ensured attention on the weaker students in the groups and individually.”

“With flash cards, we could highlight the key points and these were easier to understand.”

“Story telling videos based on specific sections from the texts were helpful.”



Visible early adopters helped: In West Singhbhum, a panchayat pradhan/mukhiya was supported in clearing class X exam through NIOS. She had dropped out after class IX due to her family's poor financial condition. But she had always wanted to study further. The importance of education was further reaffirmed when she took on responsibilities as a mukhiya. She worked hard and obtained 62% in class X. This achievement drew appreciation from the District Collector as well. Her success was also instrumental in drawing 34 girls to the Balika Shivar.

Volunteer Engagement Programme yielded significant non-academic benefits as well: Inputs from the volunteers, particularly from Z Zurich APAC and Middle East, led to an array of non-academic benefits which also contributed to the mosaic of empowering experiences for the girls and young women at Balika Shivar. They as well as the graduate girls who volunteered emerged enriched from these experiences as well.



What they shared



Girls and Young Women

“We learned to introduce ourselves properly.”

“We learned to talk to people through the screen.”

“Initially, we used to feel very shy. Then, we got better.”

“We liked dressing up in our traditional dress and share about our lives. We learned about their countries. They would move the computer around and show what is outside their window.”

“They gave us tips about reducing plastic use. They talked about why factories should be located away from villages. They also talked about dangers from smoke and that we should have chimneys.”

“We learned about kitchen garden.”

“They were all very encouraging. They all spoke nicely.”

Volunteers

Fifteen girls, aged 13 to 18 years, joined the session and their confidence and enthusiasm left us in awe. As they introduced themselves on camera, they shared their achievements and the challenges they faced with impressive articulation. It was astounding considering most of them had never ventured beyond their villages and had limited exposure to the outside world. Yet, each of them possessed an unwavering determination to make something meaningful out of their lives.”

(Rohini Das, Z Zurich volunteer, Australia)

“I always wanted to become a teacher. I am now doing BA (Second year). I help with Hindi and painting classes. I also learn a lot from them, about their lives, how they deal with their struggles and also about teaching. I like coming here and interacting with them.”

(Sarita Kumari, graduate girl volunteer, Udaipur)



Birthing aspirations: The time spent at the Balika Shivar encouraged many to have new dreams and aspirations for their futures. Besides teachers, responses for future careers began to include other options as well including becoming ASHA/Sahiyya, Anganwadi worker, panchayat pradhan/mukhiya and joining the police force. One girl wanted to be an archer.¹⁹ Some of the married women were keen to complete their class XII exam (after appearing for class X). For women in difficult marriages or widowed or separated, the Balika Shivar had become a lifeline, helping them find renewed interest and enthusiasm. Moreover, a volunteer associated with a centre expressed her interest in becoming a lawyer. She had become involved in the Sakhi Sangam initiatives and had felt the need for improved legal knowledge.

Teachers' journey of growth and empowerment: The project facilitated transformational change in the teachers as well. Many of the teachers, across the four districts, were initially uncertain of fulfilling their roles. They had varying levels of confidence. Moreover, many struggled with gendered norms and expectations in their lives as well. Thus, they



“My father used to get drunk often. He got me married. My husband died in a road accident. I had a small child. My in-laws did not want us and my parents brought me back. I felt that my life was over. I even tried to..... (harm herself). Then I joined the centre. I like coming here. I have friends now.”

(A young woman at a Balika Shivar in Udaipur)



too needed to balance household responsibilities with work and respond to concerns related to mobility and who they associated with (particularly in Rajasthan). In a way, the SEL sessions were vital inputs for them too. There were reassuring instances of family members who stepped up for them as well.

¹⁹ Plan India's sponsorship component includes a focus on sports like archery.



“I have had two births. One when I was born and one was when I got married and my father-in-law came in my life. He encouraged and supported me in completing B Ed, in staying away from the family also when needed. Initially, my husband was not so supportive. But my father -in-law stood by me. He told me that I did not have to carry *ghunghat* (i.e., cover my head and face with dupatta/shawl) like all married women are supposed to do as a mark of respect before elders, particularly men. He also supported me when I became a teacher with Plan India. Now, I can communicate better. People in the villages know me and respect me. I also contribute financially in my family.” (Pinky Kanwar, Bikaner)

“I gave the interview but I wasn’t sure that I would be successful. Then I got through! My mother-in-law initially did not support. She said – who will do all the work at home? But I joined. I was also afraid if I would be able to teach all the subjects. I worked very hard and could do it. There were many changes in me after I joined Balika Shivar. I used to feel very scared in talking before others. Now I can talk easily before anyone. The road to my centre was also not good. I fell down also once. I was afraid to step inside a government school. And then I could go there and contact them for list of drop out girls. I have become more confident.” (Sangita Kumari, Udaipur)

“My centre was at least an hour away. My timings were also not regular sometimes. People would comment – where does she go? Why does she come back so late? There were challenges at work also. People in the villages initially did not trust us. But I kept talking to the people. I met Mukhiaji. We were gradually able to get the community space also. Then, when the centre started, I tried to be like the girls – to play with them, to be their friend. I learned how to teach. All these experiences changed me. I also realised that education is about helping girls grow, helping them recognise their strengths and talents.”

“Earlier, I had a fixed way of thinking. After coming here and working, I began to see things differently. I became more flexible. I also became more confident. Now, I can talk before 100 people. My husband was supportive. He said – you work. He even started helping in the house.” (Sanju Kumari, Hazaribagh)

“Initially, I did not know the villagers. I used to find it difficult to talk to unfamiliar people. Gradually, I got to know them and then it got easier. Sometimes, they would also get very busy with their festivals and then the girls would not come to the centre. I used to tell them to come even if it was for some time. I was also slightly afraid in the initial trainings. But I am happy that I got the chance to work for society, to teach others and also learn a lot myself. Education helps us in identifying right and wrong. I also met the block level functionaries after joining Plan India.” (Tudsee Banra, West Singhbhum)





Gendered norms remained a site of evolving change and continuing restrictions: As the preceding sections highlight, girls and women were able to negotiate gendered restrictions and barriers. However, this change was also part of a larger continuum. For instance, during the field visit in Rajasthan, a teacher who sat at the entrance of a room that was visible to public view kept her head and face covered. The girls and the programme coordinator then suggested that she could shift to another position where she would not be publicly visible. She did so and then, spontaneously, removed the covering from her head and face. Rajasthan provided another telling experience. An older male family member of a female pradhan expressed his satisfaction with the Balika Shivar

and cited the growing confidence among girls. When asked how men would react if the girls began answering back (with this confidence), he gave a firm reply – our girls are respectful. They will never talk back. Thus, the perception and acknowledgment of girls' agency and confidence remained subscribed within notions of what was 'respectful' and allowed.

Girls and young women were now increasingly navigating this in-between space – of having moved forward from where they were but possibly still straining against some persistent restrictions. However, this still offered grounds for hope. In the larger endeavour of gender transformative change, the girls and young women were stacking up wins.





**Standing
on Our
Own Feet:
Working
with NEET
Women**



The Processes

Getting Started

The first step was identifying young women who could be enrolled for the vocational training component. The aim was to connect with young women who could be categorised as NEET – i.e., Not in Education, Employment or Training. Typically, this process was initiated with the identification of Balika Shivar girls. ASHAs, Anganwadi Sevikas and women Self Help Group members were often key sources of information. For instance, in Hazaribagh, the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS) functionaries encouraged SHG women linked with them to support the project in mobilisation efforts.

Since this was being done at the initial stage of the project (i.e., in 2022), some of the apprehensions and concerns related to Balika Shivar were also discerned here. For instance, negative past experiences with few NGOs/bodies made many wary of any new initiative. Often, family members (in-laws and husbands) were unwilling to let the women join the vocational training. Many women, across the four districts, were unsure themselves. The teams had to undertake repeated home visits to convince the women and family members. They stressed the unique advantages offered – i.e., the trainings would be conducted at a location close by within the villages, women would be able to work from their homes and that they would be provided initial materials/equipment in the form of a starter kit. These significant advantages did hold appeal.

There were, of course, some women across the districts who were eager to learn and wanted to try. Gradually, **another strategy** was also adopted. If a girl joined the Balika Shivar, then a young woman from the same family would be given preference for the NEET component. This helped draw more women.

Understanding Needs

Plan India undertook a market study in the four districts to identify livelihoods that were locally relevant, had potential, drew on existing knowledge and skills of the women and could be done from home. Other key factors considered included requiring less engagement of time, minimum capital investment, not require large plot/land and have low incubation period. Possible barriers for women's engagement in livelihoods were also ascertained so that these could be addressed.

Further, the teams identified premier government institutions who could partner with Plan India and strengthen the component. In Hazaribagh, Indian Council of Agricultural Research (known as ICAR, Pusa) came on board. In West Singhbhum, a collaboration was forged with Krishi Vigyan Kendra. Detailed discussions were held and Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with both institutions. Representatives from the institutions were then involved in the initial deliberations with the teams as well as focus group discussions with women at select locations to help identify livelihoods that could be covered. A set of livelihood options were accordingly identified and finalised.

“

“For many women, they (project team) had to visit several times. There are very few family members who would listen and agree at one go.”

(Group of NEET women in Bikaner)

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Livelihood Options Finalised for NEET Component

District	Livelihood with Specific Criteria for Selection
Bikaner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <i>Papad</i> (pappadum): Bikaner was a recognised a hub for making <i>papad</i> in Rajasthan. Middlemen provided women with the dough and then collected the <i>papads</i> from them. The women would get Rs 40 (0.47USD) for 100 <i>papad</i> rolled. Masala <i>papad</i> fetched a higher rate at Rs 30 (0.35USD) for 70 pieces. The project aimed to encourage women's involvement across all stages of the trade and not just rolling. ▶ <i>Ker sangri</i> (pickles): Women were familiar with making pickles from the <i>ber</i> (fruit) of the <i>khejri</i> tree and from the <i>ker</i> shrub. These were traditional delicacies with strong cultural connections for the local communities. ▶ Tailoring: There was considerable demand from women for this. They could stitch clothes and earn from their homes. ▶ Embroidery: Traditional skills of embroidery could be utilised for livelihood. ▶ Beautician: This was a growing source of livelihood, including in rural areas.
Udaipur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Dairy farming and vermicompost: These were considered feasible. Women were familiar with dairy farming. Comparatively, vermicompost was new. There could be multiple benefits including use by families for their own farms as well as for sale. This would help reduce dependence on chemical fertilisers and promote organic farming as well. ▶ Vegetable production: This was familiar and feasible.
Hazaribagh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Oyster mushroom: Local communities knew about mushrooms. There were wild varieties that grew in forests and were consumed as well. Oyster mushroom cultivation, while relatively unfamiliar, could be picked up easily by the women and was expected to generate favourable market demand. ▶ Poultry: This was familiar and feasible. ▶ Quail: Known locally as <i>Bater</i>, the birds could be reared and sold easily in Hazaribagh. ▶ Dragon fruit: The soil and rainfall patterns in Jharkhand were suited to dragon fruit cultivation which could provide high yields as well. ▶ Post harvest processing and value addition of fruits - jam, jelly and pickles: This was familiar and feasible.
West Singhbhum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Poultry ▶ Oyster mushroom ▶ Vermicompost (criteria for selection as given above)



Learning the Ropes

The target was to identify 300 women in each district. Responding to local demands, the **upper age limit for NEET women was increased from 24 to 30 years** (i.e., 19-30 years). Through persistent efforts, the teams managed to reach the target. Organising trainings was the next step. The trainings were conducted in the Panchayat Bhawans or other community spaces within the villages to ensure accessibility. This was an important decision. Often, livelihood ventures (including those under the State Rural Livelihood Missions) provided trainings within their campuses or at the block level. This, typically, restricted women's participation who could not travel far.

For Hazaribagh and West Singhbhum, ICAR and KVK provided resource persons. The trainings were usually held for two to three days and included theoretical and practice/demonstration sessions. Exposure visits were also incorporated so that the women could observe and learn from experienced practitioners. The emphasis was on familiarising women with the necessary aspects of production, maintaining hygiene and quality as well as inputs on packaging and sale. The trainings were a novel experience for

an overwhelming majority of the women. There was a palpable level of interest and eagerness to start the livelihood options across the four districts. Overall, 1222 women participated in the trainings in the first year of the project.

The First Production

Post training, the women received startup kits, free of cost, with essential materials/resources for the selected livelihoods. For instance, the startup kit for pickles included the ingredients such as *sangri*, *ker*, pickle masala, oil etc as well as packaging material. Women who had opted for the beautician trade were provided 36 essential items. Chairs (as used in beauty parlours) were also provided. However, these were to be shared among few women. For mushroom cultivation, the women were provided with oyster mushroom spawn/seed, plastic bag (pp bag), essential chemicals, bamboo and rope to hang the bags. Drums (for cleaning the mushrooms) were also given. However, these were to be shared among the women. In case of poultry, the women received 15-10 chicks each. They were also provided with enclosures for the chicks. The women were informed that the startup kits would be provided only once and that they would need to buy the materials themselves in the future.

Overall, women were encouraged to work in groups even as they handled the livelihoods individually. This was particularly relevant for women working on mushroom cultivation, poultry and food products. This would facilitate mutual support and sharing of resources.

The first engagement with the livelihoods proved to be both exciting and nerve wracking in some ways. This was particularly true for the women growing oyster mushrooms in Jharkhand. In Bikaner, the women navigated group dynamics as they began to come together and initiate the livelihood options. At the same time, many were also convinced about the unique advantages of their livelihood products. For instance, women in Bikaner did not use chemicals to increase the longevity of the pickles. They knew that were using quality ingredients and relied on oil to work as a natural preservative. Besides *ker sangri*, they also began making pickles with ginger, *thumba* (another local fruit that had digestive properties and was also known to help reduce knee pain and sugar) etc.

NEET Women Reminisce

“We had been making *papad*. But we did not know about the ingredients and their proportion in making the dough earlier. We learned how to cut the dough. We were also taught about the importance of wearing gloves, typing up our hair and using hair net also.” (Bikaner)

“We had never seen this kind of mushroom before so we were curious. We wanted to know more. Sir explained well.” (Hazaribagh)

“We had trainings for three days from 10.00 am to 4.00 pm. Gradually, we could also ask questions. We liked the practice part the best. We also saw how the mushroom bags were hung and cared for.” (West Singhbhum)

Initial Hurdles

“Mushrooms did not sprout initially. All of us began to get scared. We would call them (project team) to come home and check the bags.”

“We were so relieved when the mushroom sprouted. Somehow, that first 15-16 days seemed longer. The next time, we knew and were not that worried.”

“Some chicks caught a flu and died. But after that we were able to ensure vaccination and proper care.”

“In the training, we were told that we could do it individually or in groups. We felt that we would be able to do more, make and sell more *papad* if we formed a group. But then that also took time. We also got the machine a month and a half later.”

The First Sale

This was a memorable occasion for the women where the emotive significance of their first earning outstripped the actual amounts received. For instance, in Bikaner, 21 women in Kolayet had made 9.2 kg of pickles. They packed 23 bottles with 400 gm of pickles. They sold 14 bottles within their villages and acquaintances and earned Rs 2,100 (24.53USD). Each woman received Rs 100 (1.17USD). This spurred the group to take this initiative more seriously and strengthened their resolve to make more pickles and attract regular orders. Meanwhile, women engaged in tailoring also began earning. Preparing a simple suit (*salwar kameez*) fetched them Rs 150 (1.75USD). Stitching the *poshak* (traditional dress worn by women in Rajasthan) was more lucrative as it could be priced at Rs 500 (5.84USD).

In Hazaribagh and West Singhbhum, the women sold mushrooms primarily within their villages or at the local market (known as haat). The rates varied – usually about Rs 150 to Rs 200 (1.75 – 2.34USD) per kg. It could be priced higher than the more common button mushrooms. However, they found that people from peri-urban areas or who had lived in towns were more open to buying oyster mushrooms. The women persisted and, gradually, began to find buyers.

Further, many women engaged in mushroom cultivation were also eager to taste the fruit of their labour. They had never eaten oyster mushrooms before and a significant portion of the produce was consumed by them and their families. They distributed mushrooms to their neighbours and relatives as well.

“How can we sell to others if we don’t know how it tastes? And, actually, it tasted very nice. My family also liked it. Initially, they were also not sure about this.”

“The first time, we shared with relatives for free. Next time, we knew we would charge. Sir (resource person in the training) had also said you can do this. It will help create demand.”

“Some people would say you are just selling wild mushrooms that grow on trees. We would show them the photos on our phone - photos of the bags and how we grew the mushrooms in our houses.”

“There were some people who were also seeing this for the first time. They would ask us – how do we cook it? We would explain.”

(Women engaged in mushroom cultivation in Hazaribagh and West Singhbhum)

The Challenges Within

Besides the struggles with finding buyers and markets, most of the women had to cope with an array of challenges that were often exacerbated by their families. These were often linked with gendered and patriarchal norms and expectations that prioritised their roles as home makers with limited decision-making capacities for themselves.

Often, it was about the women's lack of confidence in their own abilities as well. Besides individual personality factors, this was also symptomatic of the broader socio-cultural fabric wherein girls and women, typically, had fewer opportunities to express themselves and experience agency. The scope of engagement with people beyond their families and villages was less.

Women from more remote and disadvantaged communities had even more limited exposure. Overall, a twin focus was needed – to support the women with consistent encouragement as well as work with the families to ensure a supportive environment for them.

For many NEET women, restrictions on mobility and who they could meet (beyond their families) were common. Interactions with other men was also, typically, frowned upon. This was particularly true for Rajasthan. They had to take permission from their husbands and in-laws for every action. Even in the more gender-equal tribal contexts in Hazaribagh, instances of husbands opposing their wives surfaced. Women were given strict instructions about the duration of time they could be away from the homes (e.g., when they went for selling mushrooms).

Deepening Engagement

Interactions with family members were enhanced. This included repeated follow ups with the in-laws, especially the mother in laws. Increasingly, the husbands were involved through direct conversations on their own and with their wives.

In Hazaribagh, meetings with couples came to be known as *pati patni sammelan* (husband wife meetings). Moreover, teams identified male role models who were supportive of their wives/daughter in law's efforts. They were publicly praised and felicitated.



Pati Patni sammelans were held periodically in Hazaribagh to encourage male involvement and support for NEET women. These were typically held in locations where men had proved resistant and stopped their wives. About fifteen couples were usually invited for a meeting. The project team pointed out the benefits of having two incomes in the family which would reduce the pressure on men. The husbands were then encouraged to provide necessary support for the women so that their livelihoods could flourish. The emphasis on acknowledging and overturning gendered and patriarchal norms and barriers was interwoven in a subtle and incremental manner in these conversations.

Learning from Experience

The experiences with NEET women in the first year proved to be extremely important and educative. The teams, across the four districts, gained a deeper understanding of the women and their contexts that influenced engagement in livelihoods. It was evident that the journey from participating

in a training to initiating the livelihood and then maintaining interest and engagement was governed by a complex matrix of factors and constraints. Considerable investments of time and effort, including continuous handholding, was required. The livelihood component saw an expansion that had not been envisaged at the conceptual stage. The donor (Z Zurich Foundation) was consulted and additional staff with expertise in livelihood were recruited to steer the component.

Also, ties with Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS) were strengthened. As mentioned earlier, women SHGs associated with JSLPS had helped mobilise NEET women at the beginning. A convergence meeting had been held with JSLPS district and block functionaries. JSLPS subsequently helped with procuring startup kits as well. The project was keen on working with State Rural Livelihood Missions, converging resources and maximising reach.

Taking Ownership

In Udaipur, poultry was introduced as another livelihood option in the second year with 180 participants. This was in keeping with demand from the local women. Significantly, each batch of 30 women grew into a **steering committee** and provided vibrant examples of taking initiative and ownership. They quickly graduated to a stage of placing orders for chicks and collecting these themselves, without being dependent on the project team. The quantum of the women's contribution in the startup kits, compared to the project, also grew over the subsequent years of project (for successive batches). This was a good practice that emerged organically (see chapter 5 for more).



“

“Initially, some people including women used to make negative comments and discourage us. But we knew that we have to focus on what we want and not listen to what others say.”

“This is our business. Of course, we have to think about it. Now everyone supports us and we also want to grow our business.”

(Sunita and Radha, president and secretary of a steering committee in Makdadev, Udaipur)

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An Important Decision

Many Balika Shivar girls came from financially strained backgrounds. As they crossed 18 years, they could benefit from engaging with livelihoods. This would also help them study further with the income earned, particularly those who wanted to join college. Young married women, who studied at Balika Shivar, could also be involved. Those who were separated, divorced or abandoned by husbands would benefit as well. It was accordingly **decided that Balika Shivar girls who were above 19 years would be considered for the NEET component as well.** In some cases, they could participate in the NEET training, give their open school exams and then initiate the livelihoods subsequently. By the third year, 127 Balika Shivar girls had joined and benefitted from the NEET component across the four districts.



When Education and Livelihood Combine

Ishwari's family comprising five members were usually dependent on her father's income as a daily wage labourer. She failed in her class X exam and dropped out of school. Her elder sister motivated her to give the class X exam through RSOS. She passed the exam. But she took on responsibilities of household chores and did not harbour any aspirations of studying further. A Balika Shivar centre opened in her village in Udaipur and it brought a new world of possibilities for her. She gave the class XII exam through RSOS and passed with 64%.

She also received training in vegetable cultivation under the NEET component. She used the knowledge gained to plant vegetables in her family's field and earned Rs 5,000 (58.41 USD). She spent Rs 4,000 (46.73 USD) to pay for her college fees. She gave the remaining amount to her father to buy seeds and saplings. The following year, Bhagwati joined the poultry related training as well. She used the money earned from selling vegetables to buy 20 chicks. She sold eight chicken and eggs and earned Rs 11,000. The money was used to cover her college related expenses and other personal needs. "I am currently studying in BA second year. I am happy that I got a second chance to continue studying. I also have 10 chicken now. I want to grow my poultry business too," she shared.

Getting Smart with Money

The project incorporated financial literacy inputs for NEET women, Balika Shivar girls and other members of the Sakhi Sangams. This was seen as a critical aspect that would help girls and young women to be informed and take sound financial decisions that could aid their journeys of agency and self-reliance. This could have far-reaching positive consequences where girls and women

undertake savings, access reliable banking services with reduced scope of being scammed as well as find ways to avoid and/or emerge from situations of indebtedness. The inputs could make a crucial difference to widowed, separated or abandoned women who were often more vulnerable with even greater financial insecurity.

A consultant was engaged for reviewing existing manuals on financial literacy and developing a customised resource for the project. A ToT was conducted for the PCs and CCs. Subsequently, they facilitated related sessions in the districts. Inputs on government schemes were also incorporated in the trainings.

Financial Literacy Inputs - Key Topics Covered

- Managing expenditure including understanding essential and non-essential expenditure
- Financial planning
- Importance of savings and having emergency fund
- Engaging with banks (opening account, checking balance, availing other services including access to loans)
- Business plans
- Key government schemes

The financial literacy trainings helped girls and young women open bank accounts, access loans and other services. The women began supporting their peers in many related aspects as well – e.g., linking bank accounts with Aadhar etc (*see section on Results for more*).

Proving Viability

As the women's engagement in livelihoods grew, certain additions were made. For instance, the startup kit for pickles now included weighing machines and packing machines (for placing

lids on jars). These were given at the group level. Subsequently, a heat gun machine was also provided to ensure overall lamination of the jars and avoid oil spills etc. Women engaged in making *papads* received the weighing and packing machines as well as a flour kneading machine.

By the end of second year, those involved in making pickles (*ker sangri*) in Bikaner had begun to earn Rs 4,000 – Rs 6,000 per month. Women could also earn Rs 1,000/1,500 (11.68-17.52USD) per month from *papad*. Tailoring fetched similar amounts which increased during festival seasons and months associated with weddings. This was true for those engaged as beauticians as well. During peak seasons, they could even earn Rs 8,000 – Rs 10,000 (93.46 – 116.82USD). Also, gradually, many women across Hazaribagh and West Singhbhum began earning Rs 5,000 – Rs 7,000 (58.41- 81.78USD) per month. Here, the bags for oyster mushrooms could be reused thrice, though the yields reduced gradually.



In Hazaribagh, 77 women who were more proficient in oyster mushroom cultivation earned Rs 3,23,400 (3778.04 USD) within three months from selling them at the rate of Rs 200 per kg. Women also contributed Rs 95,200 (1112.15 USD) and bought mushroom spawns.

Clear priority areas began to emerge across the districts. In Bikaner, the focus was on *papad*, *ker sangri* and embroidery. Increasingly, women from Sindhi community who lived close to the

international border were involved in embroidery work. The women did a particular kind of embroidery which was a traditional skill increasingly in demand by retail buyers and brands. In Udaipur, floriculture was also introduced. However, overall, poultry became the pre-eminent livelihood option here. Mushroom cultivation was particularly successful in Jharkhand.²⁰

Stories of women who utilised their earnings to expand their businesses also began to emerge. Several women decided to diversify livelihoods. The project teams supported them in these efforts. In many ways, this represented a step forward in their journey towards greater agency and self-reliance.

Neeta in West Singhbhum had opted for poultry and received 12 chicks. She used the money earned from selling chicken to buy pigs. “I realised that in my village, raising and selling pigs is more profitable. Small ones can be sold for Rs 4,500 (52.57 USD) and I can sell within three to four months. The big ones fetch Rs 10,000 – 12,000 (116.82 – 140.19 USD),” she shared.

Ongoing Support

The project teams ensured consistent follow up with all the NEET Women. This provided opportunities for the women to share updates. The team members also gave inputs as needed. Other family members were also engaged with. This helped gauge their interest and support, and put in a supportive word where needed.

Resource persons from ICAR and KVK were also available for further support and handholding as needed. For instance, a resource person from ICAR involved in the Hazaribagh trainings undertook follow up engagements with the women as well. It re-emphasised attention on vaccinations for poultry which was duly undertaken. The support activities across the two states helped the teams in shaping trainings for subsequent batches as well as understanding and responding to increasing demands for branding and marketing of the food products.

²⁰ The teams continued to support the other livelihood options that were introduced as well.



“There are always innovators and early adopters as well as those who wait to see what will happen. With women, there are so many factors involved as well – their socioeconomic condition, education and prior exposure, family support. They need technical inputs and also support in confidence building. I was always ready to support in any way I could.”

(Dr Pankaj Sinha, Scientist – ICAR and resource person involved in the project)



Measuring up to Standards

In Jajju (Bikaner), five women decided to form a group and work collectively towards enhancing their chosen livelihood (making and selling *papad*). They chose a president and secretary for themselves who became the signatories for a joint account for the group. Their first batch of *papad* was sold for Rs 5,000 (58.41USD). The group reinvested the money in preparing the next batch. They were now making 25 kg *papad* together. Kamala, the president, wanted the women to aim higher. She led the process of applying for FSSAI certification with the help of the project team. She collected and submitted the necessary documents through e-mitra. Functionaries visited her home to check the physical space for production, maintaining hygiene and resources being used for the business. Kamala successfully obtained the license in her name in June 2024. She received a FSSAI registration ID card valid for a year (to be renewed annually). This was a significant success. The women could now put the FSSAI certified label on their *papads*. This lent greater credibility and would reassure buyers of meeting quality standards. Moreover, it could facilitate opportunities for marketing and sales through offline and online platforms. It even impressed her husband who was initially sceptical. “Now, he (husband) even offers to help with the business,” shared Kamala.

There was another significant benefit. Team members could help consolidate the evolving experiences into possible models. In Hazaribagh, a group of ten women engaged in growing and selling quail decided to buy more quails and set up a hatching unit. They raised Rs 15,000 and turned their ambition into reality. Significantly, many of these evolving examples exemplified community ownership.

Certified

Meanwhile, in Bikaner, women took a vital step forward in terms of obtaining certification from Food Safety and Standards Authority of India – FSSAI. This would establish the quality and credibility of their food products with the assurance of meeting national food safety norms. It could also open more doors for marketing and sales. The first FSSAI certification was received in June 2024 in Jajju village (Bikaner).



Another NEET woman in Hazaribagh (Reena) had also applied for FSSAI license. Her application was approved in July 2024. These constituted significant milestones for the project and helped galvanise greater interest and motivation among the women and their family members. By the third year, 3 women in Bikaner and Hazaribagh had received FSSAI licenses.

Developing a Brand

Meanwhile, women in Bikaner and Hazaribagh formed the nucleus for another impressive change. They wanted to learn about developing their own brand and packaging and marketing their food products accordingly. Two brands – **Siravan** and **Kawali** – were born.

Making a Mark

In Bikaner, 44 women from two villages involved in making *papad* and *ker sangri* took the initiative. They decided to launch a brand called **Siravan** meaning meal of noon. Aspects such as designing labels and use of appropriate packaging materials were discussed and finalised collectively with the project team. Factors such as attractiveness, volume of products, risk of damage in transportation were considered. Further, food grade plastic bottles were chosen. These were sealed using heat guns, packed in cartons, and distributed in the local markets for sale. The pricing was also decided collectively.

Women engaged in oyster mushroom cultivation in Hazaribagh were also thinking along similar lines. Here, they chose to call their brand **Kawali** – a Santhali word meaning moving or mobile. The experiences in Rajasthan proved helpful as the women were provided inputs on labelling, packaging and pricing. “Earlier, we used to sell the mushrooms loose, sometimes we would just take them in our baskets. Now we have our branding. We sell in nice bottles. It feels good,” shared a group of women engaged in mushroom cultivation in Hazaribagh.



In Bikaner, each woman began to earn Rs 514 (6USD) for one batch of pickles and this amount was deposited in their bank accounts. Family members who once imposed restrictions or began to share proudly about the women’s efforts. By the third year, 225 women across seven villages had joined. The women received advanced training on pricing, managing finances and exploring new

markets. Meanwhile, the project provided packing machines, lamination tools, branding stamps and raw materials to enhance production in a systematic and professional manner. Together, they produced 250 kg of pickles. Individual earning now rose to Rs 1,028 (12USD).

For Maximum Benefit

In 2023-24, West Singhbhum became the ground for another significant development. By now, the team knew that oyster mushroom cultivation was suited for the winter months, especially November - March. The high temperatures during summer, more so in West Singhbhum, spoiled the mushroom bags and reduce production. It was also difficult to maintain the humidity levels needed.

A local team member and the livelihood coordinator began to explore other options. They learned about Puwal mushroom which could be easily grown outdoors during summer. It was not labour intensive and would sprout in 14-15 days. In fact, it grew on its own easily during the rainy season too. The only additional ingredient needed was *besan* (chickpea flour). The area where it was grown could be protected with a net.

However, the mushrooms provided a one-time yield unlike oyster mushrooms where the same bags could be used thrice. The two team members found more information, including you tube videos, and shared with their team and the project manager. The significant advantages of growing Puwal mushroom tilted the scale in its favour.



The team decided to try it out on a pilot basis with six groups of women. Spawn was obtained from a

mushroom farm in Jamshedpur. The early results were reassuring. The team then decided to buy more (12 kg). Puwal mushroom was gradually introduced to more women and it was accepted eagerly. This also meant that women could be engaged with mushroom cultivation throughout the year with puwal in summer and rainy seasons and oyster mushrooms during the winter months. This boosted their earning capacity as well.

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“We like growing puwal mushroom. Oyster mushrooms need closed space where the bags are hung and it needs a particular temperature and moistness. Puwal mushroom can be grown easily outside. It is easier in many ways. Also, oyster mushrooms sell for Rs 200 (2.34USD) per kg. Puwal mushroom can sell for even Rs 400 per kg. Many people don't buy like that. So, we sell 5-6 big pieces for Rs 100 (1.17USD).”

(Women engaged in puwal mushroom cultivation in West Singhbhum)

”

Emerging Concerns

Even as the livelihoods gained momentum, there were challenges. For instance, maintaining consistent quality became a key concern. In terms of embroidery, buyers expected infallible proportion and precision in designs. Sometimes, this was not possible considering the handmade nature of the work. However, this did lead to few cancellations of orders. There was also intense competition among sellers in Bikaner for both *papad* and pickles. A potential buyer, who could drive further demand, stepped back when a hair was found in a jar of pickles.

Women involved in making mango pickles at a location in Hazaribagh faced another challenge. They were using bottles which did not have a proper inner lid and thus, allowed slight seepage. The project teams stepped up efforts in guiding the women to place greater attention on such aspects.

Growing as Trainers

Nonetheless, by the second year, some women had emerged as skilled practitioners who could guide their peers as well. They were involved as trainers in the second year and undertook specific sessions/ parts of the sessions. It was evident that they could grow as vibrant master trainers for specific livelihoods. The basic criteria used for designating them as master trainers included:

- knowledge of vital steps related to the livelihoods
- familiarity with resources/agencies they could contact for help as needed
- good performance and productivity associated with their livelihoods
- good communication and leadership skills
- interest and willingness to support other women with their livelihoods

In Hazaribagh, 40 women engaged in mushroom cultivation emerged as possible master trainers. Some of them, like Sonamoni, began to take sessions and provide handholding support for other women. Significantly, ICAR expressed interest in providing further training and equipping the women identified as master trainers.

Growing with Experience (I)

Sonamoni was used to living with less. Her husband's income as a labourer barely helped support the family of seven in Hazaribagh. She would also pitch in as a daily wage labourer. She attended the three day training on mushroom cultivation. She was familiar with the wild mushrooms that grew in the area. "We call it oo in Santhali. But I had never seen these (oyster) mushroom before. I thought let me try," she shared. Sonamoni proved to be a quick and diligent learner. "Packing the bags take about two hours and then we have

to hang them. Then for fifteen days, we don't need to do much, just keep track of temperature and moistness. And then while mushrooms sprout, we can prepare for next cycle," she shared. The first time, she grew 20 kg mushroom and earned Rs 10,000 (116.82USD). Soon, she was earning around Rs 12,000 per month during the oyster mushroom season. Sonamoni appreciated the opportunity to earn while being at home. "This is much easier than going for *mazdoori* (daily wage labour). There, we would get Rs 200/250 (2.34 – 2.92USD) for a full day's work. Men got more, about Rs 300/350 (3.50 – 4.09 USD), even when they did the same work."

In 2024, she began to help other women with mushroom cultivation. "Four-five women came to me and said please teach us. I could practically show others what to do. I think I have taught around 40 so far," she said. This included 26 women covered in the next batch of training on mushroom cultivation in her area. The growing income helped her open a shop next to her house. Her husband began to travel further for work. "He is now in Malaysia. I can handle things here," she asserted.

Sonamoni's remarkable efforts found appreciation and she was awarded with the Plan India Impact Award. She used a part of the prize money to start a small shop in her house. She began to sell mushrooms through the shop. Along with the other members in her group, she also secured a loan of Rs 20,000 (233.64USD) from JSLPS to expand mushroom cultivation.

In West Singhbhum also, three women involved in mushroom cultivation grew as master trainers. They too trained other women and provided handholding support. Their efforts drew attention from JSLPS as well.

Growing with Experience (II)

Mamta, a resident of West Singhbhum, had been married at 15 years. Her husband was an agricultural labourer. The family had grown to include five children – three girls and two boys. She readily agreed to join the training for mushroom cultivation. She was among the women who piloted puwal mushroom. The first production weighed 7 kg. She was able to sell at a good price (Rs 400/kg). She encouraged other group members to try puwal mushroom as well. Within 2024, she and her ten group members had grown 61 kg in three phases and earned Rs 64,000 (747.66USD). She also switched to oyster mushroom during October 2024 – April 2025, thus maximising her earning potential. Overall, Mamta could earn Rs 36,000 (420.56USD) from puwal and oyster mushroom cultivation in a year.

Her example inspired another 24 women to join the NEET training. She also began to help women within her group and beyond with various aspects of mushroom cultivation. A team from JSLPS visited her at home and asked her questions. They also observed the ongoing cultivation. This was part of a process of exploring her potential certification as a master trainer under JSLPS. “I was initially nervous when they asked questions. But then after we talked for some time, I became confident. I told them how I grow mushrooms myself and how I support the other women in my group,” she shared. While the results of the visit and assessment are awaited, Mamta was ready to step up as a master trainer. “I am happy to help others,” she declared. Meanwhile, the DC had also shared a news report about the JSLPS visit to Mamta’s house on his personal facebook page. This was also an achievement for her!

Comparatively, eight women emerged as possible master trainers in Rajasthan. This covered five women working on food products (*papad* and *ker sangri*) in Bikaner and three women engaged with poultry in Udaipur. However, they were yet to be involved in training other women.

Finding Markets and Opportunities

Meanwhile, buyers were identified in Bikaner, Jaipur and Delhi and samples of *papad* and *ker sangri* pickles were shared with them. The *papads* of Rajasthan also made their way to Uttarakhand. Essentially, 50 kg of *papad* was sold to a producer’s cooperative in Uttarakhand.

Markets were identified for marigold (floriculture) in Udaipur, introduced as a livelihood option in the second year. This included 17 local markets, a block level market in Jhadol and within central Udaipur. The latter was the biggest market considering the city’s identity as a renowned tourist destination. However, compared to food products, women were

still at a very initial stage with floriculture. They required more time and efforts to move up in terms of volume of flowers sold. Also, collecting flowers from women (in order to sell higher volumes) entailed considerable travel since their homes were scattered (dispersed population). This also had an implication on the costs involved. Comparatively, women were better placed to address the local demand for poultry, especially *desi* breeds. They could rear 40 to 120 birds within three to four months and sell these.



In Hazaribagh, there was scope of absorbing high volume of mushroom production in nearby markets including Charahi, Tatijharia and Hazaribagh. The neighbouring town of Vishnugarh could also be considered. In West Singhbhum, five local markets were identified for mushroom. Further, it was learnt

that the DC office staff purchased mushroom on a weekly basis. Also, a weekly market (Sunday) functioned close to the district court premises. Mushrooms could be sold here as well. A block level market as well as the main market in Chaibasa could be tapped too.

Online Foray

By September 2024, another milestone was reached wherein the Sirawan brand of food products made their way onto Udhyam Vahini's ecommerce platform called Chokha (www.chokha.org). Five types of pickle and two types of *papad* (*moong dal* and masala) were available. The items were also available on another platform managed by Harsiddhi Mahila Producers Company based in Dewas, Madhya Pradesh (www.harsiddhimahilaproducercompany.com). This was affiliated with Udhyam Vahini as well.

Efforts were also made to register food products on Flipkart and Amazon. However, the related compliances /norms proved challenging. For instance, six monthly laboratory testing reports were needed. This was difficult for the women producers operating from less accessible/remote locations covered in the project.

However, another opportunity soon came their way. Two NEET women from a village in Bikaner, accompanied by a Balika Shivar teacher, participated in the Saras Raj Sakhi National Fair held in Jaipur. Supported by Rajeevika (Rajasthan Grameen Aajeevika Vikas Parishad), this fair brought producers of various products from across the country. The two women sold 20 kg of *ker sangri* pickle and earned Rs 6,400 (74.77 USD). This was an important opportunity for them to learn about varied buyer preferences as well as interact with other women sellers across the country. This provided further impetus and motivation for them.

Seeding Change

The project also encouraged preparing vermicompost as a livelihood option. Though this was taken up by fewer women, it held the potential for significant change including in terms of promoting organic farming.



Becoming an Example

Asha, a resident of West Singhbhum, had opted for vermicompost under the NEET component. “My family are all farmers. We had some idea. We would be able to use it in our farming,” she shared. Asha attended the training and was subsequently provided with the vermi bed, green net for covering the bed and red earthworms. The participants were expected to add cow dung. It took about 70 days for the earthworms to do their magic and have vermicompost ready. “I got around Rs 1,000 (11.68 USD) from selling. But the main focus was on using it ourselves. We used to buy 10-12 bags of fertilizers. We stopped buying that,” she shared. “Vermicompost is good for the soil and makes it fertile while urea and other chemical fertilisers are harmful. There are long term benefits,” she added. Asha is now keen to add another vermi bed. Some friends have also expressed interest in undertaking vermicompost. “Many people in the area did not know about this (vermicompost). We have to start ourselves and show others what is possible,” she added.

Becoming Entrepreneurs

The project had an emphasis on supporting women to grow as entrepreneurs. Accordingly, 40 group leaders underwent a two-day training on entrepreneurship in Bikaner. The training covered vital aspects such as developing a vision for their business, drawing up production plans, meeting quality parameters, packaging and costing. The training also covered communication and how women could present and conduct themselves in business related settings. Drawing from previous learning, this was seen as a gradual, incremental process. The project team remained available for continuous support and encouragement. This approach was followed by the counterparts (project teams and agencies involved) in Jharkhand as well.

Developing a Hub

Meetings with panchayat pradhans (mukhiyas) and BDO in Ichak block in Hazaribagh to initiate mushroom cultivation became the trigger for a significant milestone that even the project team had not envisaged. The BDO was impressed by the update shared by the project team on mushroom cultivation in other blocks and the resultant benefits for the women engaged. He instructed the panchayat mukhiya of Devkhuli to take up this initiative. She too became an active and vocal supporter.

“

“Mukhiya ji is involved. She keeps asking us for updates. She helps us in many ways. BDO Sir is also involved. He was present in our training and he encouraged us to do mushroom cultivation.”

(Women engaged in mushroom cultivation in Devkhuli, Hazaribagh)

“Here, the situation of many families is not good. Many husbands go out to work and may not be able to send money every month or in time. Now women can handle their homes and children and also undertake mushroom cultivation and earn. I feel very satisfied that women are becoming independent. Devkhuli panchayat has become a mushroom hub. Now, more women want to join. Women from neighbouring areas also come to meet me and ask about this.

(Manju Devi, Devkhuli GP mukhiya)

”

The proactive interest of the BDO and the Mukhiya helped turn Devkhuli into a GP level mushroom hub with 80 women cultivators. Both the BDO and the Mukhiya rendered significant support across all stages – training, follow up, encouraging market linkages and ways of growing the livelihood.

This promising practice drew the attention of the DC as well who became keen to see this replicated in other locations in the district as well (see chapter 5 for more).

Growing in Strength

Increasingly, women were reinvesting the money to grow their livelihoods. Thus, during October – December 2024, 487 NEET women across the four districts reinvested Rs 1,06,400 (1242.99 USD). In Hazaribagh, 230 women involved in mushroom cultivation reinvested Rs 34,500 (403.03USD) to purchase mushroom seeds (at Rs 150/kg per person). In Udaipur, 110 women from the second year batch contributed Rs 11,000 to expand their ventures in floriculture, while 20 women reinvested Rs 34,000 (397.19 USD) in poultry farming, purchasing 12-15 chicks each. Similarly, 127 women in West Singhbhum reinvested Rs 26,900 (314.25 USD) in mushroom cultivation. These figures were also indicative of a growing sense of confidence in themselves and their livelihoods and represented a hard-earned success.

“

“In our group, we are using facebook and have got 12-15 customers upto Chaibasa.”

(Women engaged in mushroom cultivation in West Singhbhum)

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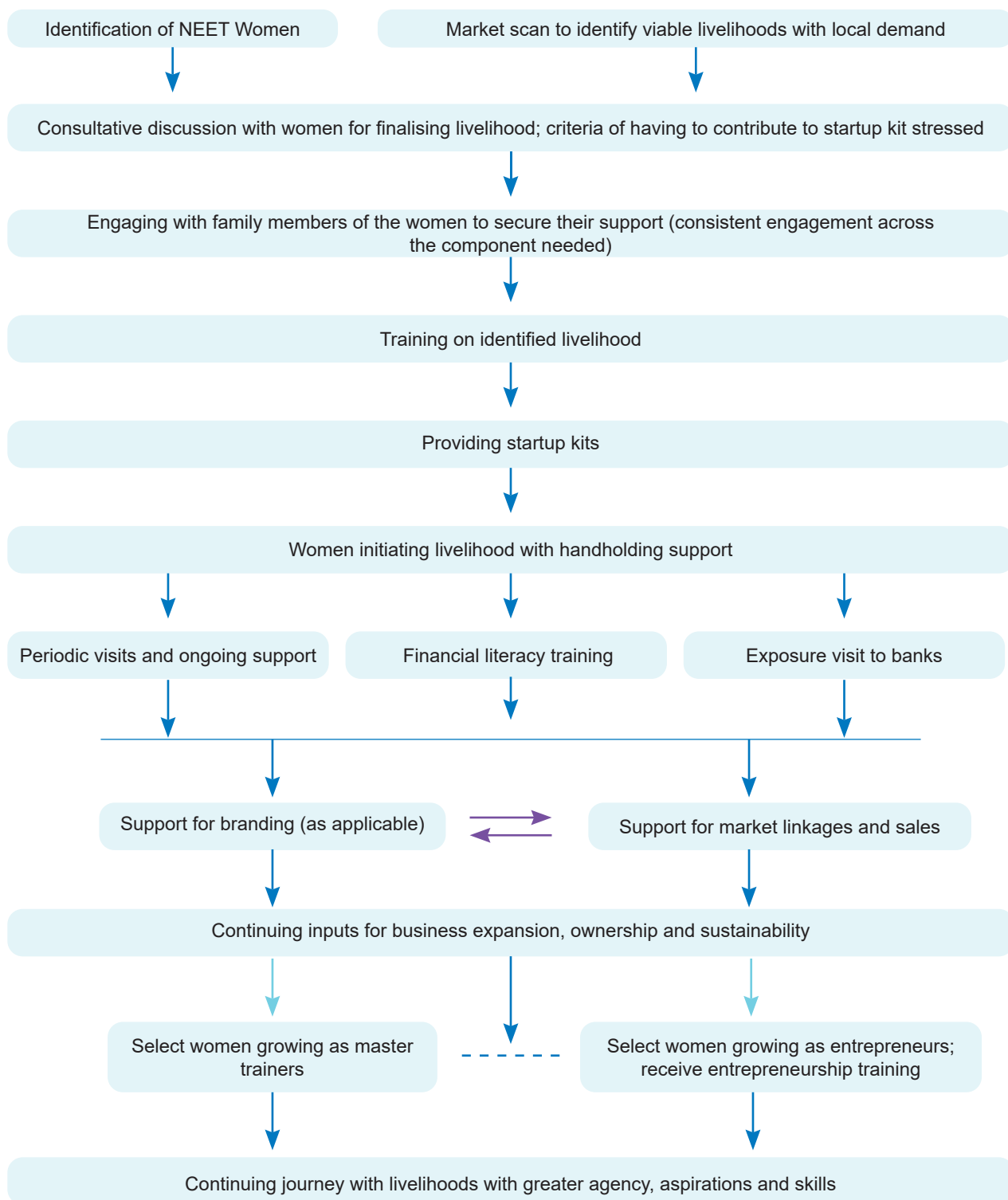
Several groups in West Singhbhum were now comfortable with undertaking both oyster mushroom and puwal mushroom ensuring regular engagement and income through the year. Moreover, some women in Jharkhand had begun to use facebook for selling mushrooms. The project teams also began to

hear of women making reels about their mushroom cultivation efforts and sharing on social media. These developments helped upturn myths about rural disadvantaged women and internet usage.

As the project drew to a close, there was palpable energy and enthusiasm among the women regarding their livelihoods. There was a sense of achievement. More importantly, many women were now dreaming new dreams for themselves and their families.



Process Pathway: Working with NEET Women



NOTE: The arrows in light blue represent trajectory options for women as some would grow as master trainers and entrepreneurs. These two categories overlap as well. This is represented by the dotted line between them. Overall, all women grow in their businesses incrementally.

Results

The NEET women component represented an important area of learning for the project. **The project enabled 3746 NEET women to initiate livelihoods of their choice.**

An array of changes experienced: In many ways, engagement in livelihoods led to significant changes that exceeded the incomes earned. Across the four districts, many women spoke about a growing sense of self and agency.

Changes Experienced



Self

“Earlier, I couldn’t do so many things. Now, I feel more confident.”

“I feel less afraid.”

“We were suppressed from childhood. Now, I speak up when I feel I need to say something.”

“I now know that I also have some talent and I can do something.”

“Now I don’t have to ask anyone else for money.”

“Sometimes, I used to take money from my husband’s pocket when he was not around. Now I don’t need to take.”

“With the first income, I saved half for the business. Chicks may fall ill and I may need to buy more. I spent the rest on myself and the family. I never used to think like that before.”

“We realised that that we are not less than men. It felt very good.”

“I have started earning. I now want to earn more and help my family buy a four wheeler.”

“I feel that we are now able to stand on our own feet.”

Family

“I get more respect in the family.”

“We used the money for paying children’s school fees and household expenses. That felt good.”

“With two incomes, it is a lot better. Earlier, there used to be more tensions.”

“Earlier, I was not involved in some discussions in the family. Now they (mother-in-law and husband)include me.”

“Some women were able to use their earning to reduce their family’s debts.”

In the Neighbourhood/Village

“Initially, many women did not want to join the trainings. Then they saw us being successful. Now many of them come to us. They want to learn from us.”

“I can look at a chicken and say how much it weighs and how much we can price it. I can tell which breed it is. People are very surprised by that.”



Benefits from financial literacy inputs: There were substantial benefits. For instance, 897 bank accounts were opened for NEET women and Balika Shivar girls. It was seen that 78 women engaged in mushroom cultivation switched from keeping cash at home to maintaining their savings in bank accounts. A much higher number became more familiar with managing their accounts. They learned about other banking services. Trainings and subsequent discussions boosted the practice of savings as well. In Udaipur, many women who had never considered savings earlier had an average of Rs 5,000 – Rs 10,000 (58.41 – 116.82 USD) put aside in their accounts.

Insights Gained

Gains in livelihood for women were dependent on multiple dimensions that require sustained engagement: The project's experiences with NEET women reaffirmed the essential interlinkage between their socio-cultural contexts and journeys of livelihood and financial growth. Capacities (including for decision making), confidence, exposure, mobility – all these critical aspects were often governed by gendered norms, location and other background characteristics. Risk taking, an essential prerequisite in entrepreneurship, was also typically not expected or encouraged for women.

As women became engaged in the livelihoods, this also creating dynamic situations within households. Familial support, particularly from husbands, helped navigate these. However, where such support was lacking or inconsistent, women were more likely to drop out. There were, of course, individual personality factors that were also at play. Women needed sustained inputs and mentoring support to deal with this array of individual and social factors as well as maintain their motivation and momentum.

Trainings must be located close to the women and accessible for them: This was a non-negotiable aspect in the project. Trainings were held in the villages which enabled more women to participate. Typically, livelihood trainings were often undertaken at the block level or on campus (which could be further away). It was also evident that the women appreciated the practical demonstrations and exposure visits. This stress on being direct

and also providing minimal theoretical inputs was particularly relevant.

Growing financial independence was particularly essential for women who were separated/abandoned and widowed: NEET women included those who were divorced, separated and widowed. They lived with increased vulnerabilities and risks due to their social positions. Their overwhelming dependence on other family members, particularly in their parental home, also made it easier for them to be neglected or abused. Engagement in livelihoods and the related income was a particularly crucial support for them as it also enhanced their position and value in the households. It also granted them greater negotiation and decision-making power.

Seema was married at 15 years of age. Her husband, who was much older than her, turned out to be an alcoholic who did not treat her well. Seema came back to her parents who supported her. However, her brother and sister-in-law were less welcoming. They began controlling her life, restricting her mobility. Her aged father worried about her. He supported Seema when she wanted to join the training for mushroom cultivation. As Seema began to earn, her brother and sister-in-law started treating her with more respect. They began to consult her on family matters.

Moving from a subsistence mindset to a risk taking one remained challenging: As the women progressed in their livelihoods, another challenge became apparent – low appetite for risk. For instance, many women seemed reluctant to increase the number and size of the flock (say, from 20 to 100 birds). Similarly, in Rajasthan, women appeared to be more comfortable with daily wages for making *papad* rather than take on an entrepreneurial role. The women possibly operated largely from a (personal/family) consumption and subsistence mindset. There were, of course, multiple reasons behind it including family's current

financial insecurities, lack of exposure for women (and, sometimes, even men), gendered constraints on mobility as well as individual personality factors. The subsistence mind set, then, also impacted possibilities of reaching greater volumes often necessary for enhancing profitability. It was evident that more time and consistent support was needed to help women see themselves as entrepreneurs with appropriate support from their families.

Women leaders within the livelihoods linked groups played an important role in supporting peers and triggering significant change:

Experiences across the four districts showed that women who were early adopters and led groups could galvanise their peers. The project consciously focused on enhancing their capacities. This included providing entrepreneurship training and other handholding support. These women successfully explored market linkages and encouraged group members to provide quality products. They formed a crucial link that could accelerate progress of the

group members towards sustainability.

Enhancing ownership of NEET women required a conscious, consistent approach: Over the project period, the ownership of women increased incrementally. Various aspects contributed to this. The project began to ask the women to contribute partially for the startup kits. This strategic decision paid off. It also helped reduce dropouts in the initial stages as women who were more likely to continue signed up and contributed for the startup kit. Continuous engagement with families for securing their buy-in was another consistent area of work. It was important for women to feel that they could Plan India and control their livelihoods with the support of their families. They were also encouraged to reinvest a portion of the profit in the business for gradual expansion. The role of women leaders was crucial as well and has been highlighted above. They became valuable and accessible examples that spurred emulation.







Stronger Together: Sakhi Sangam Experiences



The Processes

Coming Together

Sakhi Sangam – i.e., groups of girls and women anchored to the Balika Shivar – represented another significant domain of engagement in the project. These were initially envisaged as alumni groups including girls and young women who had attended Balika Shivar and qualified the class X and XII exams through the open school system. They would be best suited for disseminating key messages for promoting girls' education in their communities. They could contribute to enhancing enrolment as well as follow up for regular attendance and participation of the girls at the Balika Shivar. They could grow as catalysts of change aiding conversations and actions for countering gender discrimination and other concerns that constrained girls and women particularly in terms of aspirations and educational journeys.

These objectives became the nucleus around which a constellation of intent and actions concretised. Besides the current batch and alumni girls, Sakhi Sangam brought ASHAs/Sahiyyas, Anganwadi Sevikas and SHG women from the local communities into their fold. At some locations, government school teachers and ward members joined. Volunteers (graduate girls who began supporting the centres) grew as key members too.

Significantly, formation of Sakhi Sangam was initiated in the first year of the project as soon as the Balika Shivar were established and the attendance at these centres began to stabilise. The teachers sounded out potential members and helped them come together for meetings at the Balika Shivar. The girls at the centres and those who had passed out also helped spread the word and rope in others. West Singhbhum adopted a slightly different approach. It supported girls and women associated with the Balika Shivar to come together at the block level. Subsequently, it too shifted to locating Sakhi Sangam at the centres.

Sakhi Sangam began weekly or monthly meetings across the four districts. These meetings helped the members know each other better. They could share

and learn from each other. Gradually, the meetings became important spaces for identifying issues and concerns and devising ways of addressing them. By the end of the first year, 49 Sakhi Sangam were functioning initiating distinctive ripples of change.

Some expected **challenges** surfaced. Attendance in the initial Sakhi Sangam meetings was often erratic. Some active girls and young women would migrate alone or with families for work. This affected the group processes. Moreover, many had to carve out time for these engagements while balancing household tasks and work. The teachers, cluster coordinators as well as active Sakhi Sangam members played an important role in addressing these situations. They encouraged the girls and young women in dealing with the challenges and finding their way to the group meetings. These initial experiences of being present, listening actively and supporting each other laid the foundation of the groups.

Valuable Inputs

The teams provided a range of inputs to the Sakhi Sangams. This included **information on key government services and schemes as well as helping them identify related functionaries at the panchayat, block and district levels**. The teams also began arranging visits and interactions with these systemic actors. Sakhi Sangam members visited police stations and interacted with the personnel. This included meeting women police personnel. This was an important engagement that helped the girls and young women to overcome their fears and apprehensions about approaching the police with their concerns. Overall, Sakhi Sangams became familiar with roles of police, CHILDLINE (1098, national helpline for children in distress)²¹, panchayats and BDOs.

Further, in Bikaner, the Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate (ACJM) took Sakhi Sangam members around the court. He also spoke to them about

protection including recognising good touch and bad touch. Further, a lawyer who was also associated with police as a legal counsellor interacted with the girls and young women at multiple Balika Shivar. She discussed various laws for women and answered queries as well. In West Singhbhum, Child Welfare Committee members (entrusted with dealing with matters related to children in need of care and protection)²² interacted with Sakhi Sangams.

In fact, **legal literacy** grew as an important domain of input. Thus, more than 100 Sakhi Sangam members visited police stations in Udaipur in the third year of the project. The process of filing First Information Reports (FIRs) was explained. Online frauds and how to deal with them were discussed. The interactions, especially with a woman SHO²³, proved to be inspiring. She also spoke about the preparation needed and steps involved in joining the police force. Also, the Plan India sponsorship team in Bikaner facilitated a three-day training of Legal Mitras who function under the Rajasthan State Legal Services Authority. Fifteen Sakhi Sangam members participated in this training and learned about various acts including The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 and The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012.

“I like meeting the girls. I always encourage them to study, to think about their lives, to stand on their own feet. I share about my own journey with the panchayat system, challenges I have faced and how I have overcome.”

(Radhadevi Parmar, Panchayat Samiti Sachiv, Udaipur)

Further, Sakhi Sangam members in Udaipur met the Panchayat Samiti Sachiv i.e., the head of the Panchayat Samiti at the block level as well. This interaction helped the girls understand about **PRI**

functioning as well as recognise this as another possibility open for women.

Gradually, inputs on **financial literacy** were also provided. This has been mentioned earlier (see *chapter 3*). Related external opportunities were utilised as well. Thus, 31 Sakhi Sangam members in Bikaner also attended a financial Literacy training organised in collaboration with State Bank of India. Resource Persons from Rural Self Employment Training Institute and Lead Bank highlighted the importance of decision-making skills and financial independence as they touched upon managing finances, savings and accessing banking services. The discussions here, and across the other three districts, enabled girls and young women to understand and begin to take small but significant steps towards prioritising themselves and being self-reliant.

Sakhi Sangams also received incremental inputs on **developing and performing street plays**. Eleven street play groups began working on scripts on gender discrimination, girls' education, dowry and dangers of teenage pregnancy. In Bikaner, a professional was also engaged to train the girls. Here, traditional songs were also incorporated in street plays on preventing child marriage and importance of girls' education.



²¹ CHILDLINE was earlier operationalised, country wide, through a partnership between government and designated non government bodies. It has now been integrated within the DCPU's under Mission Vatsalya, the flagship child protection scheme in India.

²² This is under The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2015 and Amendment Act 2021

²³ Station House Officer oversees the daily functioning of a police station. This is equivalent to the Inspector rank.

A Visible Presence

Gradually, the Sakhi Sangams became active participants in commemorating key days like National Girl Child Day and International Women's Day. These became occasions for Sakhi Sangams to create awareness about key issues. Sakhi Sangam also got the opportunity to perform their street plays before the DC and other dignitaries on International Women's Day, 8th March 2023 in Hazaribagh. For girls and young women who often hesitated in speaking in public and more so before strangers, this was a remarkable feat of persistence and growth.

It was an important milestone for another reason as well. Two Sakhi Sangam members (girls attending Balika Shivar) who prevented child marriages were felicitated. This reaffirmed the vital importance of combating child marriage and the critical role that informed and proactive girls and young women could take. The positive attention also acted as a reassurance, a salve, for the many comments and adverse reactions that were braved for preventing the child marriages (*more on this later*).

Second Chance Education Related Initiatives

Aiding Participation

The initial actions by Sakhi Sangams centred on identifying girls who were irregular in attendance or could not participate as much as they wanted due to familial constraints. The focus was on securing their enhanced attendance and participation. They would collect preliminary information, discuss and decide on the feasible course of action. Typically, this involved visiting the girls' homes and engaging with them and their parents. Sakhi Sangam members would try to understand the parents'/guardians' concerns while also stressing the importance and benefits from coming to the centres and clearing the class X or XII examination through NIOS and RSOS (as applicable). Also, as the ASHAs, Anganwadi Sevikas and other women in the Sakhi Sangams learned about the open school system, they too became vocal supporters and began responding to doubts and queries during home visits and other community interactions.

Together, the Sakhi Sangam members became a growing force that sought to dismantle existing barriers and help make second chance education for girls and young women a tangible reality.

Through their efforts, Sakhi Sangams aided enrolment of girls and young women at the Balika Shivar. Over the project period, they helped 1288 girls and young women connect with the centres and resume their educational journeys.

For a Centre Within Reach

Meanwhile, Sakhi Sangams across Bikaner and Hazaribagh accomplished another significant feat. In Bikaner, their efforts led to the opening of 4 AI centres in government schools in Kolayet block. These were designated as examination centres as well. In Hazaribagh, Sakhi Sangams successfully pushed for opening an examination centre within reach in Barkhata. Girls and young women from Daru, Ichak and Tatijhariya no longer needed to travel 65 km for giving their NIOS exam. These initiatives made a crucial difference in terms of enhancing accessibility for Balika Shivar girls as well as others enrolled with RSOS and NIOS in the areas (*see chapter 5 for more*).

Leveraging Resources

Moreover, across the four districts, Sakhi Sangams began to identify concerns associated with the Balika Shivar space/building. This included need for construction related repair work, toilets and boundary wall, improving electricity fittings and water supply. They began reaching out to gram panchayat pradhans/mukhiya for these aspects. Besides sharing their concerns verbally, they wrote applications and also undertook sustained follow up. These efforts bore fruits and they were able to secure financial resources for the changes/improvements needed. These successes consolidated Sakhi Sangam's credibility in their communities and served as vibrant reminders of the potential of collective power in ushering change.

Such initiatives emerged organically across the three years as the project.

Holding the Key

A community hall served as Balika Shivar in one of the villages in Kolayet block in Bikaner. Though constructed by the panchayat for common use by the local communities, it lacked basic amenities and did not have a boundary wall. Moreover, it was located in a portion of the village inhabited primarily by Meghwal community. The deeply entrenched caste hierarchies in the region meant that people from other communities did not access it. This space had been offered to Plan India. The Sakhi Sangam associated with the centre knew that it had to change the script. The girls and women wrote to the Panchayat Pradhan requesting for a boundary wall and building toilets. Simultaneously, they also engaged with village leaders, upper caste members and local boys to underline the need for making the community hall a safe and accessible space for all Balika Shivar participants irrespective of their caste identities. As more community members began to speak up in their support, the Panchayat Pradhan developed a proposal for the boundary wall and toilets and submitted it to the block. The proposal with the budget of Rs 3,42,720 (4003.73 USD) was approved. The construction work was undertaken with active support of several men and boys from the local communities. The keys to the renovated building were handed to the Sakhi Sangam. This was a particularly significant milestone. Girls and young women, who were often in the periphery in public spaces, found visible acknowledgment of their agency and ownership.

Finding Solutions

Sakhi Sangams also stepped up in other ways. For instance, the groups in Sadar and Daru blocks in Hazaribagh held meetings with panchayat, local SHG and other community members to highlight the need for covering significant transportation costs for students travelling to the NIOS examination centre 45 km away. Together, they mobilised Rs 11,500 (134.33 USD) for the Balika Shivar girls from their communities. Moreover, in West Singhbhum, they emerged as saviours for girls and young women in Balika Shivar at a particularly crucial time.

Saving the Day

The NIOS exams for the third year coincided with state assembly elections. This meant that vehicles for transporting the girls to the examination centres were not easily available (since these had been taken for election duty). To make matters worse, a storm was expected to hit the eastern part of the country. This would affect Jharkhand as well. The project team was anxiously involved in figuring out the travel arrangements. Sakhi Sangams, including the graduate girl volunteers in West Singhbhum, assured the project team that they would help mobilise vehicles.

Sakhi Sangam members reached out to people in their communities who had vehicles. They followed up with them individually. Where needed, they held small meetings to highlight the urgency of the situation. Within a short time, they successfully managed to arrange for 25 vehicles so that almost 250 girls from all the Balika Shivars could be taken to the examination centres.

Combating Social Evils

Stepping Up

Child marriage emerged as a recurrent topic and important area of engagement for the Sakhi Sangam across the four districts. There were numerous examples of girls and young women whose lives had changed drastically after child marriages. This included women who were widowed, separated or abandoned at a young age and experienced further vulnerabilities. The related discussions helped the members understand the range of adverse consequences of child marriages including disrupting education, limited or no say in decision making, susceptible to various forms of violence along with greater risks of illnesses, malnourishment and even mortality for mothers and children. The legal implications, as outlined in The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006, were also shared by the project teams.

These discussions strengthened their resolve to intervene, even in the face of community opposition and backlash. Girls below 18 years negotiated with parents to postpone their weddings. They spoke up for peers who were being pressurised for child marriages. Sakhi Sangam members visited homes to convince parents as needed. The support of ASHAs/ Sahiyyas and Anganwadi workers in the groups helped. When their initial efforts failed to yield results, they called CHILDLINE (1098) and reported the child marriages.

There were also few instances of girls who had initially joined Balika Shivar eloping including in Udaipur and West Singhbhum. The teams tracked the girls and could successfully ensure that their access to education was not disrupted (see *chapter 2 for an example from Udaipur*). Sakhi Sangam played an important role in convincing the girls to return to Balika Shivar.

A Mosaic of Experiences



“They would say – why are you interfering in my family’s matters? Will you take responsibility of my girl if this marriage breaks?”

“For some of us, our parents did not mind so much. But there were neighbours who would provoke our parents. They would say – why is your daughter getting involved in all this?”

“We had stopped a child marriage. The father was an alcoholic. One day, he stopped Ma’m and me when we were on our way. He threatened us. This was later reported to the mukhiya also. He (the father) met me again later. He asked me – did I say too much the other day? I was drunk.”

“A girl had shared in the group that her parents were getting her married. She was below 18 years and did not want to marry. We met her parents and explained to them about bad effects of child marriage for the mother and the child. But they did not agree. We approached the ward member and mukhiya. They listened to us. But we did not see them take any steps. We went to the parents again. Finally, we called CHILDLINE and they came. By then, the wedding cards had got printed but we were able to stop the marriage and help our friend. We felt good about that.”

(Sakhi Sangam members across four districts)

“A 16-year-old girl had eloped. Later, we learned that he was already married. We contacted her. The girls in the Sakhi Sangam spoke to her. We helped her return to her parental home. The girl did not want to come back to the Balika Shivar. All of us kept contacting her. I also followed up. It took us almost a month to make her change her mind.”

(Teacher, West Singhbhum)



In Hazaribagh, the initial efforts by the Sakhi Sangam paved the way for a coordinated mechanism— **the child marriage prevention and tracking register at the block level**. This initiative had far-reaching effects. The team was also invited to share the processes at key district level meetings of Mission Vatsalya and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao to aid replication (*see chapter 5*). Moreover, four girls from the Sakhi Sangams were felicitated by the district administration. They received certificates and cheques of a token amount (Rs 2,500 each; 29.20USD) in recognition of their efforts for preventing child marriages.

Protecting Their Own

A Sakhi Sangam in West Singhbhum provided another valuable example of the power of collective action in combating trafficking.

A Brave Effort

Trafficking of girls and women for labour has been an unfortunate reality in Jharkhand. At one location in West Singhbhum, middlemen operated an ‘employment cell’. The cell would reach out to parents/guardians with offers for work for their daughters. They would typically provide an advance payment as well besides assurance of sending monthly incomes. The girls would be taken to factories in Tamil Nadu for work. They would be made to live in cramped, unhygienic spaces. Their identity documents would also be taken away from them. The men involved in the cell yielded a lot of influence locally and, typically, no one dared to disobey them.

The Sakhi Sangam came to know about the cell’s intention to take away a group of 28 girls from the village. The members contacted the parents and asked them to reconsider their decision to send their daughters. Many stated that they had already been paid and could not detract. However, there were a few parents who were ready to speak up. They were

threatened by the cell. Sakhi Sangam decided that the traffickers could only be opposed if they were united. They consulted the village elders and leaders including panchayat. A community meeting was convened wherein the dangers of unsafe migration and trafficking, with poignant examples, were shared. The villagers decided not to send their daughters and this was conveyed to the cell in clear and firm tone. The cell was forced to back off.

Taking a Stand

Increasingly, domestic violence began to feature in the Sakhi Sangam meetings as well. Unfortunately, this was not uncommon. As the groups grew in experience and strength, they began to intervene. The presence of frontline workers in the groups, who supported them, boosted these efforts.

Countering Domestic Violence

In Udaipur, several instances of domestic violence surfaced. In one situation, a girl’s uncle used to beat his wife, more so when he drank alcohol. The girl, accompanied by ten Sakhi Sangam members, went to their house and spoke to the man. “Initially, we spoke properly. Then, we also threatened that we can go to the police if needed,” shared the girl. The man stopped hitting his wife. The group felt that it was the threat that worked. “If people understand easily, then it is good. Otherwise, we mention the police where we need to,” shared another Sakhi Sangam member with quiet confidence. Significantly, the group undertook follow up for four months. The husband had learnt his lesson and had stopped hitting his wife.

“I am also a member of Sakhi Sangam. I like to help women. I have to do that in my role also. It is best if we all work together and support each other. In some cases, I have helped the groups connect with police when needed.” Jeevan Lata, Saathin (a helper level position in Anganwadi Centres under ICDS), Udaipur



I am also a member of Sakhi Sangam. I like to help women. I have to do that in my role also. It is best if we all work together and support each other. In some cases, I have helped the groups connect with police when needed.”

Jeevan Lata, Saathin (a helper level position in Anganwadi Centres under ICDS), Udaipur



In Hazaribagh, Sakhi Sangams prevented three instances of **domestic violence** in coordination with the local gram panchayat. Information was shared with DSWO as well who appreciated such efforts. Subsequently, Sakhi Sangam began joint awareness programmes with GP on periodic basis with young women in the area.

Health and Hygiene

Breaking the Silence

Within the Sakhi Sangams, ASHA and Anganwadi Sevikas had begun sharing information about the mandated health and nutrition services. Aided by these inputs and support from the local teams, Sakhi Sangam **began accessing services meant for them**. The most remarkable change was possibly in terms of **menstrual hygiene management**.

Typically, menstruation remained a taboo topic in the local communities shrouded in myths and misconceptions. Girls and women were isolated and restricted. This, along with lack of toilets in schools, contributed to irregular attendance and, gradually, drop outs. Prolonged use of unhygienic cloth pieces (that were often not washed and dried in the sun properly) led to infections and health concerns.

The Sakhi Sangams became a platform for frank discussions on menstruation. ASHAs/Sahiyyas and Anganwadi Workers provided information including hygienic practices during menstruation. ANMs were also roped in when needed. The project

teams, across the four districts, facilitated these sharing and learning sessions. Sakhi Sangams also connected with relevant functionaries to access existing provisions for sanitary napkins. The National Adolescent Health Program responded by ensuring the distribution of 400 sanitary napkins to the most affected villages across the four districts.



“This (menstruation) was never really discussed in school. We talked about it here properly for the first time.”

(Sakhi Sangam in Bikaner)

“We discussed periods for the first time in Sakhi Sangam. This had never been discussed before.

(Sakhi Sangam in West Singhbhum)



Further, 245 adolescent girls were linked with Government of Rajasthan’s Udaan scheme in Bikaner where they received one-time free sanitary napkin packets. By the second year, girls had written to the Department of Health (Government of Rajasthan). Five hundred and ten girls across 11 centres in Bikaner began to obtain sanitary napkins under the scheme.

In Udaipur, Sakhi Sangams reached out to the ANMs with requests for sanitary napkins and iron tablets (for preventing anaemia). The ANMs responded enthusiastically. They began health education sessions at the centres. They also ensured provision of sanitary napkins and regular supply of iron tablets. Meanwhile, in West Singhbhum, the interactions with health department functionaries led to comprehensive health check-ups for 328 women including 301 Sakhi Sangam members. Further, 2,400 sanitary pads and 72,000 iron tablets were distributed to the Sakhi Sangam members during the second and third year of the project. In Hazaribagh, the Sakhi Sangam members from two blocks interacted with the Medical Officer In Charge (MOIC). They were able to secure a one-time supply of sanitary napkins for 120 adolescent girls as well as a commitment for continuing this.

By 2024, Menstrual Hygiene Day was also added to the list of key days that were commemorated at the Balika Shivirs with support from the Sakhi Sangams. Thus, on May 28, 2024, over 1200 girls participated in various activities. This included performing plays, folk dances and painting competitions. Frontline health workers addressed the gatherings as well. Parents, panchayat members and government officials were also present. Such events represented another step forward in breaking taboos and promoting conversations involving young and old, women and men.



Recognising a Concern

Meanwhile, a Sakhi Sangam in Hazaribagh played an important role in identifying a key health concern – tuberculosis – in their community. This initiative also reflected an organic combination of inputs and support from Z Zurich volunteers, frontline workers and the project team.

For Greater Benefit

During a discussion at a Balika Shivar in Hazaribagh, girls had spoken about a growing number of family members coughing and falling sick. This was shared with the teacher and the Z Zurich volunteers in an interaction. The volunteers cautioned the girls not to disregard this. It could signify a bigger concern or illness. Supported by the project team, a Sakhi Sangam decided to look into it. The members covered almost

200 families in their community and found that 13 individuals had common symptoms. They immediately reported this to the ANM at the local health sub centre. She then took over and guided the concerned individuals in undergoing tests. Nine of them were diagnosed with tuberculosis. Treatment was begun immediately. The ANM undertook follow up as needed. “We wanted to find out exactly how many people were unwell. We later learned some had TB and then they started getting treatment as well. We were very happy that we could help them,” shared Sakhi Sangam members.

The Sakhi Sangam also launched an awareness campaign including creating posters and performing street plays to educate their village about tuberculosis symptoms, treatment, and the importance of early detection.

Accessing Schemes, Growing as Citizens

Bridging Gaps

Sakhi Sangams across the four districts helped group members and others in their communities to access various government schemes and entitlements. They provided relevant information and also helped people connect with the relevant service delivery structures/actors. These efforts encompassed a wide range of domains including financial incentives for women (e.g., Government of Jharkhand’s Maiyya Samman Yojana²⁴), pension schemes for elderly and widows, insurance and even afforestation (Government of Jharkhand’s Birsa Harit Gram Yojana²⁵). Sakhi Sangams began providing information on obtaining identity documents and ration cards as well (*see results section for more*).

They also began utilising the inputs received from financial literacy trainings and supporting other

women in the communities. They highlighted the importance of savings. They helped other women in their neighbourhoods open bank accounts. Often, they began guiding other members in their SHGs on financial transactions. In West Singhbhum, they also guided peers on the process for linking bank accounts with Aadhar.

Working Closely with Systems

Meanwhile, the Hazaribagh district administration undertook a novel initiative focusing on involving young people in enhancing community engagement and governance. Many Sakhi Sangam members applied. After a rigorous selection process, 24 members were chosen for a month-long internship with Social Welfare and Panchayat Raj department functionaries as well as the block administration in Churchu.

The selected interns interacted with BDOs, panchayat pradhans (mukhiyas) and frontline workers including Anganwadi Sevikas and Sahiyyas. They were briefed on various government schemes and services. Moreover, they organised Gram Sabhas in 17 villages in Churchu. They also organised rallies and street plays to create awareness. All these efforts translated into tangible gains. Eight elderly individuals were supported in accessing Old Age Pension Scheme²⁶. Four families received houses under the Abua Awas Yojana²⁷. Moreover, 30 adolescent girls were helped in accessing Savitribai Phule Scholarship²⁸ that enabled them to continue their educational journeys. The Sakhi Sangam members' efforts were appreciated and they were given certificates by the district administration.

Becoming a Youth Icon

Three interns (and Sakhi Sangam members) - Soni, Vimla, and Bojmati – were selected as Youth Icons for **Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP)** initiative by the district administration and the District Election Commissioner. The three young women organised village level campaigns on voters' rights and responsibilities. They also led a block level meeting focusing on electoral participation which had government and community representation. Their efforts led to the registration of 56 first time voters who had crossed 18 years. This journey was particularly enriching for the three young women as well as they learnt about democratic processes and citizenship. Being recognised as Youth Icons brought greater credibility and prestige and was an important milestone in their journeys of growth as change makers for their communities.

Bojmati Kumari's dreams and aspirations also took wings. She belonged to a poor family dependent on her sister's earning as a construction worker. She had been forced to drop out of school. Enrolment in Balika Shivar had helped her complete class X with an impressive 78%. Bojmati was an enthusiastic organiser under SVEEP. She, along with her Sakhi Sangam members, helped 48 first time voters enrol. "I now want to be a news reader on tv. I want my voice to inspire others," she asserted.

²⁴A Government of Jharkhand initiative, *Maiyya Samman Yojana* provides a monthly payment of Rs 1,000 to women aged 21-49 years. The scheme aims to enhance wellbeing and financial security of women.

²⁵*Birsa Harit Gram Yojana* is operationalised by the Government of Jharkhand. It combines aims of environmental conservation (through afforestation) and generating rural livelihoods.

²⁶Old Age Pension Scheme is a central government scheme under the National Social Assistance Programme which provides monthly pensions to elderly individuals without stable income.

²⁷*Abua Awas Yojana* is a scheme run by the Government of Jharkhand. It provides financial aid to economically weak families for constructing houses.

²⁸*Savitribai Phule Scholarship* is a scheme run by the Government of Jharkhand wherein financial aid is provided to adolescent girls to prevent dropouts.

Other Key Initiatives

Sakhi Sangam in West Singhbhum identified **two children for the rehabilitative sponsorship component under Government of India's Mission Vatsalya and the related state guidelines**. Both children had a single parent and lived amidst poverty and deprivation. The group shared information with the team and helped collect information for the sponsorship applications that were subsequently submitted to the DCPU. Their efforts were successful and the children began receiving monthly payments as per the state guidelines²⁹.

Also, Sakhi Sangams in Bikaner identified 10 girls who were not receiving the scholarship support under the Government of Rajasthan's **Palanhar Scheme**. Essentially, this scheme provides financial assistance for children attending government schools whose fathers have passed away or are incapacitated in some way. They followed up with the schools and panchayats and helped regularise the payments. Though the scheme did not provision for open school students, the Sakhi Sangams compiled a list of 25 girls in very vulnerable situations who had lost their fathers and attended Balika Shivar. They collected and submitted the list with names related documents (including death certificates of fathers). They were ready to speak to higher functionaries within the PRI and education departments for this.

Growing as Change Makers

As the third year of the project neared its end, Sakhi Sangams across the four districts had experienced significant changes. Even as the groups stood at varied points on their growth trajectories, a mosaic of individual and collective empowerment was evident. The Sakhi Sangams were now increasingly, and organically, leveraging funds and support from panchayat and other community members for addressing concerns related to second chance education. They were involved in a range of initiatives including helping peers and other community members access various schemes and services. Multiple strands were now coming together.

Cummulative Change

In Udaipur, the Sakhi Sangam (especially the Balika Shivar girls) utilised community celebration of Gandhi Jayanti (October 2) to submit a letter to the Panchayat Mukhiya requesting for his support in renovating their centre. The Mukhiya promised to take action. The girls followed up regularly for three months. An amount of 4626 USD was sanctioned and the centre received a fresh coat of paint turning it into an even more welcoming space. The girls also successfully secured regular access to sanitary napkins and iron tablets from the local Anganwadi Centre. They connected with the principal of the local government school with a request for career counselling workshop. This request was received favourably.

Sakhi Sangams were also growing as a strong community voice, stepping up to prevent child marriages and domestic violence, combat trafficking and forced labour and so much more. The steady trickles of change were beginning to combine into a river bursting with energy, ready to make its way through obstacles and constraints.

Results

A vibrant pool of catalysts of change: By March 2025, 135 Sakhi Sangams with 20615 members were in place across the four districts. They represented a vital, informed pool of girls and young women who could help their peers, families and communities in accessing mandated services and schemes and connect with various duty bearers particularly at the panchayat and block levels. Many of these groups had grown considerably with experience and emerged as community voices for change.

An array of changes experienced: Sakhi Sangam members had grown tremendously themselves. The biggest change identified by several members interacted with, across the four districts, was in terms of their enhanced agency and confidence.

²⁹Government of Jharkhand. *Jharkhand State Sponsorship Guidelines 2018*.



Changes Experienced

“Earlier, I was shy and did not talk much. Now, I can talk before others.”

“For the first time, I began to think about gender and gender-based discrimination.”

“If I hadn’t joined the centre and Sakhi Sangam, I would probably have been married by now.”

“Why are girls always told what to do and what not to do? I can also decide.”

“I can fight for my rights.”

“We know more now about the panchayat, who does what.”

“I have met the tehsildar. We have gone before the BDO. We can approach them in the future also. Even my family now tells others about this.”

“If needed, we can go to the police. Earlier, we used to feel scared in approaching them.”

“If an official doesn’t listen, we will go again and again. We will keep going back to them and asking what happened (to our application/request).”



Child marriages prevented: There were at least 36 clearly recorded instances of Sakhi Sangams stepping up to child marriages. There would be countless more examples as several members across locations reiterated that their engagement with Balika Shivar and Sakhi Sangam had meant postponing of marriages in explicit and implicit ways. Many had countered conversations within their families as well as motivated and supported peers to take a stand. This represented an important achievement.

Resources leveraged from communities: This became a crucial domain of contribution and success. Sakhi Sangams reached out to and involved panchayats for renovation, light fittings and other infrastructure related aspects for the Balika Shivar across the four districts. They raised community contributions in the form of vehicles as well as finances for transporting girls to the examination centres. This aspect proved to be a good practice birthed by the project (see *chapter 5*)



“We have helped dropout girls join the centre.”

“We went to the girls’ houses, the ones who didn’t attend regularly, and spoke to their parents to convince them.”

“We got a boundary wall for our centre.”

“We approached the Sarpanch for light fitting and painting of the centre. He agreed.”

(Sakhi Sangam members)



Supported access to government schemes and services:

Sakhi Sangam members helped more than 1000 girls and young women to access various government schemes including Savitri Bai Phule Yojana, Mahila Samman Yojana, widow pension, Abu Awas Yojana, among others, unlocking benefits worth Rs 1,90,79,000 (222,885.51 USD).

Receiving recognition: Sakhi Sangam girls were felicitated in Hazaribagh by the district administration during the International Women’s Day and International Day of the Girl Child celebrations in 2023 and 2024 for their role in preventing child marriages. Three girls also received recognition as Youth Icons for the SVEEP initiative. These events received media coverage which further encouraged the girls and their peers as well as contributed to raising the profile of the work done. In West Singhbhum too, five Sakhi Sangam girls were felicitated by for their role in promoting girls’ education.



In Bikaner, Sakhi Sangam from a particular village (Grandhi) in Bikaner were honored with certificates at the Bharat Vikas Camp (an initiative of the Government of Rajasthan) for their efforts for supporting girls’ education and preventing child marriages.

“We are viewed positively (by the community). We are seen as helpers.”
“Now many others come to ask us for help and advice.”
Sakhi Sangam members

Another recognition mattered – the **recognition received from their communities**. For many women, these recognitions positively disrupted previous patterns of experience where they were more used to being sidelined or devalued.

Insights Gained

Sakhi Sangams fostered sisterhood and solidarity:

This was a significant benefit experienced by the members. Girls and young women formed friendships based on trust and mutual sharing. They could unburden themselves and talk frankly about the constraints and challenges faced in their daily lives and draw support from each other. These discussions also re-emphasised the commonality of some of these challenges and help overcome feelings of isolation. As the Sakhi Sangams began to take actions, they were able to view themselves as individuals with agency rather than passive victims of circumstances. The collective strength of the Sakhi Sangams became an important support for many.

The group space and identity were appreciated by the frontline health workers who joined as well. Besides providing inputs in keeping with their mandated roles, they could also share their highs and lows as women and support each other.

SEL, academic and Sakhi Sangam components complimented each other:

In many ways, the progress made by Sakhi Sangams was built on a foundation that included SEL. The gains made therein – particularly related to sense of self, determination and decision making, empathy and team work – aided the Sakhi Sangams. It also helped them in planning their initiatives collectively. The academic component also contributed to their growing sense of confidence.

Moreover, it made processes of writing letters to various functionaries for their concerns more accessible and less scary, even in situations where they got someone else to do it. Significantly, the importance of being educated was reaffirmed in many ways as Sakhi Sangams discussed local issues such as preventing child marriages and unsafe migration. Education, particularly of girls, could serve as an important barrier to these harmful practices and conditions. Thus, these aspects/components came together for a larger cumulative impact.

A growing recognition of gendered constraints and discrimination and the need to address them was discerned:

As the Sakhi Sangams began to support girls in joining the Balika Shivar and maintaining regular attendance, they were also confronted with the range of gendered concerns that impeded their paths. This was not new since they also hailed from the same socio-cultural settings. However, many members had never reflected on this. As the range of issues covered increased, they could also connect the deeply embedded threads of patriarchy that privileged boys and men over girls and women. The common roots of female infanticide and son preference, constraints on girls' mobility and aspirations, girls and women being seen as marriageable commodities, trafficking, alcohol addiction and domestic violence began to surface in the discussions. This also led to a growing resolve to start from where they were and do what they could while also hoping for better lives for the next generation of girls.

“If 1000 girls can change themselves and then help change their children later – that would be a massive change, won't it?
(Sakhi Sangam in West Singhbhum)



Drawing in allies: Sakhi Sangams helped trigger important community conversations on girls' education and the need for educating married women. They also helped highlight other issues as mentioned above. Significantly, their efforts drew in allies. They helped fathers and husbands to reflect on their roles and support their daughters and wives at the Balika Shivar. They connected with boys and men and encouraged them to support the centres as well. The Panchayat pradhans were also brought closer to the Balika Shivar and motivated to utilise available resources. They connected with BDOs and other functionaries, many of whom were more used to being approached by men with their concerns. This was true particularly for the project locations. They also grew as allies for Sakhi Sangams.

Sakhi Sangams began journeys of being empowered, engaged citizens: From an initial focus on supporting girls education, most Sakhi Sangams expanded their canvas. Even within education, they increasingly learned to take their concerns to panchayat, various government functionaries and NIOS/RSOS officials. Their initiatives on helping community members access various schemes and services, contributing in SVEEP and engaging on other issues represented their growth as empowered, engaged citizens.



A group of young women in school uniforms are smiling and looking towards the camera. In the background, a banner is visible with logos for PLAN and the Zurich Foundation, and text for 'PROJECT BALIKA SHIVIR' and 'Internship for Sakhi Sangam Group'.

Ensuring Ownership and Sustainable Change: Innovations, Promising and Good Practices



The Balika Shivar project provided innumerable instances of successful collective efforts involving girls and young women, PRI representatives, government functionaries as well as open school system boards (RSOS and NIOS). The range of actions included significant examples of contribution to systems strengthening as well. Many of these instances have been featured in the previous chapters. Here, select practices that qualified as promising or good practices have been included. The project teams recommended practices which were then crosschecked against the following criteria decided in consultation with the donor (i.e., Z Zurich Foundation).

Criteria for selecting Promising and Good Practices

- **Relevant**
- **Innovative**
- **Inclusive and respectful of participants (including child friendly, gender transformative)**
- **Safe**
- **Accountable**
- **Effective**
- **Built/strengthened partnerships**
- **Contributed to systems strengthening**
- **Sustainable**
- **Replicable**
- **Scalable**

Practices which were relatively new, may not have a substantial body of data/evidence but showed distinct potential were categorised as promising practices. Those that were at a greater stage of maturity were considered as good practices. Also, as indicated above, innovation was included as an important criterion.



EDUCATION

1] Balika Shivar as a Safe, Enabling and Learning Space for Girls and Young Women

- ▶ Unique Pedagogical Model
- ▶ Combining Academic and Non-Academic Components
- ▶ Collective Action
- ▶ Contributing to Systems Strengthening
- ▶ Working with Allies (Including Male Role Models)

Issue/Concern: Girls are often forced to drop out of school especially at secondary and senior secondary levels due to a complex interplay of factors including distance, strained financial situation as well as gendered norms and

constraints (restrictions on mobility, fears of safety which are also linked to the larger societal expectations of maintaining honour, burden of household chores and caregiving etc). School related factors also come into play including accessibility of the learning environment, challenges with language (where mother tongue is different from the language of instruction), provisioning of toilets etc. However, with second chance education, they can resume their educational trajectories. Here, they need a safe and enabling connecting space that is responsive to their needs and aspirations and can aid this transition. Balika Shivar was envisaged as such a space that could help girls and young women overcome their educational deficit in a supportive environment and qualify class X and XII exams through open school systems.

Steps Taken: The Balika Shivar were located in spaces close to the girls and young women in community spaces provided by panchayats and local communities. This ensured accessibility as well as community ownership. A growing array of examples also emerged of Sakhi Sangams (including Balika Shivar girls) leveraging local resources for improving their centres (*also see practice Leveraging Resources*).

Teachers came from the same and neighbouring areas and could ensure that teaching learning processes favoured use of local languages. Accelerated learning techniques were used to help

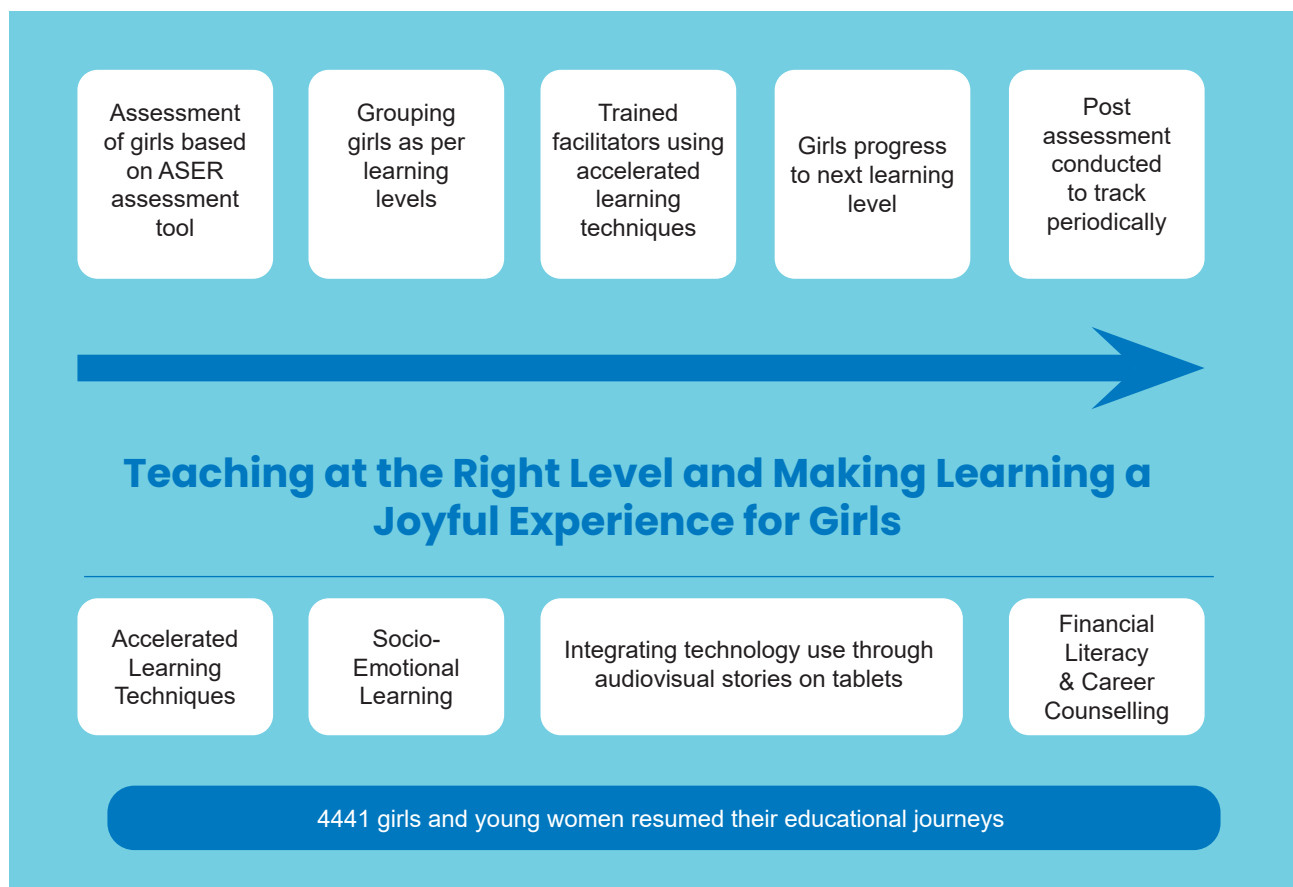
the girls and young women. This included greater use of groups (and peer learning), encouraging learners to ask questions (learner – teacher conversations expected to be skewed towards the former in 80:20 ratio), liberal use of audiovisual aids, project-based learning etc.

The Balika Shivar also utilised story telling videos delivered through tabs that presented key subject content in an interactive manner. Socio Emotional Learning component ensured that the girls and young women found an enabling space to explore their own identities and grow in confidence. It also sought to enhance attributes such as empathy and decision making and foster team work.

GOOD PRACTICE

Balika Shivar offered a unique pedagogical model integrating teaching at the Right level (inspired pedagogy), Accelerated Learning techniques, Socio-emotional Learning, Financial literacy and Career Counselling. Moreover, the intrinsic connection with families, local communities and panchayats bolstered possibilities of sustainability. There were growing instances of panchayats taking ownership and sharing resources (financial and otherwise for the Balika Shivar).





The ASER assessment tool aided grading of the learners into word, sentence, paragraph and story levels in Hindi language. Besides writing, reading, listening and comprehension skills were also gauged.

Also, SEL and Accelerated Learning worked in tandem to greater cumulative impact. Further, financial literacy inputs were integrated to help the girls and young women to grow in terms of financial self-reliance as well. Career counselling inputs were also provided.

Besides directly supporting the girls and young women, the project also consistently worked with their family members. This

included an emphasis on recognising and encouraging male allies (fathers, brothers, husbands, father-in-law) to support them.

Thus, a composite model emerged that recognised the critical interlinkages between education and the larger socio-cultural fabric that influenced it. It provided specific pathways for girls and young women to explore and grow both in terms of educational outcomes (i.e., qualifying class X and XII through NIOS and RSOS exams) as well as the much needed and more vital aspects of agency and confidence. In many ways, Balika Shivir became a vibrant fulcrum for locating gender transformative programming (*see chapter two for more*).

2] Securing New Open School Centres

- ▶ Sakhi Sangam
- ▶ Convergence
- ▶ Collective Action
- ▶ Contributing to Systems Strengthening

Issue/Concern: In **Bikaner**, Balika Shivar girls from Kolayet block had to travel 100-150 kms to the closest RSOS examination centre. In **Hazaribagh**, girls from Ichak, Daru and Tatijhariya faced a similar problem. The nearest NIOS examination centre was 64 km away in Sadar block. The local transport system did not offer frequent and sufficient options (i.e., buses) along these routes. The NIOS examination dates coincided with the Jharkhand State Assembly elections and this further increased their worries. Clearly, more examination centres located closer to the villages were needed.

Steps Taken: In **Bikaner**, Sakhi Sangam members raised this issue before a Minister (Government of Rajasthan) who had come to visit the health centre in the block. They also submitted an application. The Minister, who belonged to Kolayet, understood the need and agreed to take action. Sakhi Sangam and the team also engaged in follow up with him and RSOS functionaries. Their persistence paid off. By July 2024, four Accredited Institution (AI) centres had been opened in government schools in Kolayet. These were designated as examination centres as well.

In **Hazaribagh**, Sakhi Sangams prepared a list of girls who would find it difficult to access the exam centre because of the distance. It yielded a high number – 521! Sakhi Sangam representatives and the project team met the Regional Director – NIOS, Ranchi and shared their concerns. They highlighted the increased risk of girls dropping out/missing the examination and requested for a centre that would be closer, preferably in the Barkhata block.

However, it soon became evident such a decision involved multiple actors, including the state department of education, who would need to

be engaged. The project team met the District Education Officer, Hazaribagh. The importance of NIOS and potential impact of a centre in Barkhata were elaborated upon. The DEO agreed to support the request. However, he pointed out that the District Collector's approval will be needed.

The District Collector was then approached. Recognising the urgency of the situation, the District Collector organised an interdepartmental convergence meeting with representatives from the district administration, education department and NIOS, Sakhi Sangam and project team. The

GOOD PRACTICE

- Relevant
- Innovative (not sure)
- Inclusive and respectful of participants
- Safe
- Accountable
- Effective
- Built/strengthened partnerships
- Contributed to systems strengthening
- Sustainable
- Replicable
- Scalable

Sakhi Sangams in Bikaner and Hazaribagh were able to utilise their collective voice in raising a vital concern. A range of other relevant actors were also involved highlighting the importance of convergent actions. The new centres represented a significant achievement that would enhance accessibility and, thus, benefit subsequent batches of Balika Shivar girls as well as countless other individuals appearing for open school board exams in these areas.

Regional Director – NIOS participated in this meeting. The Sakhi Sangam members highlighted the challenges faced by students in remote villages and the steps needed to ensure smooth access to the examination centres. Their words made a difference. The stakeholders collectively agreed for the need for the centre. Approval was granted.

Next, a joint team of NIOS Regional Office and project team visited local schools to identify and finalise location of the new examination centre. Typically, NIOS centres were hosted by government schools. School authorities had several queries. Moreover, many of them were not fully aware about NIOS. The joint team persisted and was able to finalise the location. The Balika Shivar girls could give their exams at a centre close to them.

PREVENTING CHILD MARRIAGE

3] Institutionalising Child Marriage Prevention and Tracking Register

- ▶ Sakhi Sangam
- ▶ Convergence
- ▶ Improved Data Management
- ▶ Contributing to Systems Strengthening
- ▶ Collective Action

CHILD MARRIAGE				PREVENTION & TRACKING REGISTER					
Name of Child	Date of Birth	Name of Guardian	Address of Child	Name of Village	Name of Sakhi Sangam	Date of Registration	Details of Case	Tracking Date	Status
...
...
...

Issue/Concern: Sakhi Sangams had been involved in preventing child marriages in Churchu block in Hazaribagh. Gradually, they had begun to receive information more frequently from their peers and other community members. They would speak to the parents/concerned family members and try to convince them to prevent, or delay, the child marriage. Where needed, they would connect with the Mukhiya/Panchayat Pradhans and CHILDLINE and seek their support. Sakhi Sangams also helped the girls continue their education as well as access any other services as needed.

The project team remained consistently supportive. Moreover, it also kept the BDO updated. However, **it became increasingly evident that a comprehensive and coordinated mechanism for tracking, recording and follow up of child marriage prevention cases was needed.** This would also ensure a single-entry point that would reduce duplication (e.g., where the same instance was reported multiple times by varied agencies) and enhance accountability.

The **Child Marriage Prevention and Tracking Register** was introduced at the block level with the proactive support of the BDO. Information provided by Sakhi Sangams as well as other NGOs/bodies working in Churchu was noted in this register. Further follow up of at-risk girls, after the child marriage was averted, was also recorded in it. This aided attention on rehabilitative efforts as well. Between February 2024 – April 2025, Sakhi Sangams with active support of local panchayats prevented 19 child marriages in Churchu, Hazaribagh. This was noted in the Child Marriage Prevention and Tracking Register which aided attention on follow up measures for the affected girls as well. Further, six Sakhi Sangam groups received commendations from the District Social Welfare Officer for their leadership in preventing child marriages.

Moreover, the register became the fulcrum for ensuring coordinated actions among key actors including likeminded community members/groups, Village Level Child Protection Committees including Anganwadi Workers, Panchayats and CHILDLINE and block functionaries (particularly BDO). There was increased attention on helping girls and families access government welfare schemes to

reduce vulnerabilities and risks of child marriage. The initiative helped systematise and mainstream this unique combination of community led actions, multistakeholder convergence and data driven governance.

GOOD PRACTICE

- Relevant
- Innovative
- Inclusive and respectful of participants
- Safe
- Accountable
- Effective
- Built/strengthened partnerships
- Contributed to systems strengthening
- Sustainable
- Replicable
- Scalable

The initiative, launched in a block, was taken up by the district administration and DCPO for scale up. This significant achievement reiterated the clear benefits - ensuring coordinated and comprehensive mechanism for tracking, recording and follow up of child marriage cases at the block level with improved data management. It reduced risks of duplication (i.e., where the same child marriage was reported multiple times by different agencies) and aided accountability.

The project team was also invited to share the processes involved at key district level interdepartmental meeting of Mission Vatsalya. It also shared about the initiative during a meeting convened under Beti Bachao Beti Padhao in Ichak block in Hazaribagh. By the end of the third year of the project, the DCPO had issued a letter asking all 16 blocks in the district to initiate the Child Marriage Prevention and Tracking Register.

LIVELIHOOD

4] Women Coming Together as Steering Committee to Lead Poultry Business

- ▶ NEET Women
- ▶ Convergence
- ▶ Collective Action

Issue/Concern: The project supported NEET women with structured trainings and subsequent follow up support on specific livelihoods. There was also an underlying emphasis on encouraging the women to be proactive, take ownership and move towards self planned growth in their livelihoods. However, typically, this trajectory was not easy to achieve. Various factors including socialisation and persisting influences of gendered norms (eg – related to mobility), lower education levels, less exposure as well as individual personality factors combined to affect their engagement. Moreover, consumption and subsistence requirements often trumped risk taking and entrepreneurial mindset. In this context, the initiative taken by groups of women in Udaipur to form a steering committee for themselves was remarkable.

Steps Taken: Thirty women who participated in a batch (poultry training) formed a group to support each other even as they undertook the livelihood on an individual basis. Six steering committees evolved headed by president and secretary who were chosen by the women. From the onset, the committees ensured collective discussions and decisions on various aspects of the livelihood. They would then engage with the project team accordingly. A flexible purchasing Plan India was finalised where the women could buy as many chicks as they could afford, with the option of purchasing more as their income grew. The committee members placed the orders and collected the chicks themselves.

Overall, 180 women contributed Rs 3,57,680 (4178.50 USD) and procured 3,137 chicks for themselves. Gradually, they began to earn from selling poultry as well as eggs. They spent a portion of the income on supporting their children's education and contributing to household expenses. They also used a portion to buy more chicks. They contributed a substantial Rs 7,35,580 (8593.22 USD) over the second and third years of the project.

GOOD PRACTICE

- Relevant
- Innovative
- Inclusive and respectful of participants
- Safe
- Accountable
- Effective
- Built/strengthened partnerships
- Contributed to systems strengthening
- Sustainable
- Replicable
- Scalable

The steering committees took ownership and ensured that the women were involved in all key decisions. They shared responsibilities and undertook various tasks themselves including placing orders and obtaining chicks. They fostered self-reliance and reduced dependence on the project team.

5] Developing Gram Panchayat Level Mushroom Hub

- ▶ Block and GP Ownership
- ▶ Convergence
- ▶ Collective Action
- ▶ Contributing to Systems Strengthening

Issue/Concern: Plan India had shared success stories regarding livelihood opportunities for women, particularly the lucrative value of mushroom cultivation, in a meeting where the BDO (Ichak) was present. It was stressed that women could do mushroom cultivation from their own homes and earn a stable income that could help improve financial security of their families. The BDO expressed keen interest and encouraged the Gram Panchayat Pradhan of Devkhuli to take this up. Together, the BDO and GP Pradhan resolved to undertake a novel initiative – of setting up a **mushroom cultivation hub at GP level in Devkhuli**.

Steps Taken: The first step was identifying women for the mushroom cultivation training. The Pradhan played an important role in creating awareness and mobilising women. She highlighted the benefits of mushroom cultivation in various meetings and platforms. She also provided the space and other resources needed for the training undertaken with 80 women. The training covered key topics including understanding the life cycle of mushrooms, preparing the substrate for cultivation, maintaining optimal temperature and humidity as well as pest management measures. Packaging and market linkages were also covered. Significantly, the BDO was present during the meeting. He also motivated the women to learn and take up mushroom cultivation for a better future for themselves and their families.

The women received the startup kit which included 3 kg of mushroom spawn and began cultivation. Soon, they were in a position to sell the first produce. Since they had never tasted oyster mushroom before,

many women cooked and consumed a part of the produce themselves. They also shared with relatives. This also helped generate interest and demand. They began selling more substantial portions from the second batch in local markets. The women were also connected with their peers in other blocks where Plan India supported mushroom cultivation. A brand – **Kawali** – had already been established for marketing mushrooms. They too could, gradually, access these opportunities.

As they began to earn, it was also evident that most women needed inputs on managing their earnings. They also needed support in managing bank accounts. Some did not have bank accounts as well. Accordingly, a financial literacy training was organised for them. This highlighted aspects like the value of financial planning and savings as well.

PROMISING PRACTICE

- Relevant
- Innovative
- Inclusive and respectful of participants
- Safe
- Accountable
- Effective
- Built/strengthened partnerships
- Contributed to systems strengthening
- Sustainable
- Replicable
- Scalable

The initiative highlighted the positive potential of engagement of block and GP in supporting women's livelihoods. The ownership taken by the GP was particularly commendable and a key factor ensuring greater access to supports and sustainability. The scope for replication was also evident as the BDO had initiated discussions for the same.

The Pradhan kept track of the progress made by the women. She participated in meetings with the NEET women and enquired about the status including challenges faced. She also encouraged the project team to keep her updated. The BDO also remained informed about the progress. Both expressed willingness in supporting the women find more buyers and markets. Further, the BDO offered to help the women connect with JSLPS and access microfinance loans to sustain and also scale up their ventures.

Within a few months, Devkhuli GP began to draw attention as a vibrant mushroom hub with the direct ownership of the panchayat and block authorities. The Pradhan took another significant step. She ensured a discussion on the mushroom hub in the Gram Sabha held as a run up to preparing the annual Gram Panchayat Development Plan India (GPDP). The benefits of the mushroom hub found further public acknowledgement. The Pradhan stated her decision to include this component as part of the GP's focus activities in the next GPDP i.e., for 2025-26. The BDO also expressed interest in replicating the mushroom hub in neighbouring GPs with support from JSLPS. Plan India would possibly be engaged for providing technical support as needed.

CROSS CUTTING

6] Sakhi Sangam as Change Agents

- ▶ Multisectoral Initiatives
- ▶ Collective Actions
- ▶ Convergence
- ▶ Contributing to Systems Strengthening

Issue/Concern: Girls and young women, more so from disadvantaged communities, often navigated significant barriers in their lives. Socialisation processes, gendered norms and other background characteristics (including lower levels of education, living in relatively remote areas, less access to opportunities and exposure) often led to limited scope for growing in terms of agency and confidence. It was also not uncommon to find limited participation in groups/platforms for sharing concerns and working together with various stakeholders for their solutions. It was important for girls and young women to recognise their strengths and potential and become informed and empowered actors within their families and local communities. Sakhi Sangam groups, initiated under the Balika Shivar project, helped realise this critical intent.

Steps Taken: Groups of girls and young women were formed, anchored to the Balika Shivar. The groups included students at the centres as well as those who had passed out. Women from the communities also joined. Further, frontline workers such as ASHAs and Anganwadi Sevikas were included. In some locations, ward members also joined. Graduate girls from the local communities who volunteered at the Balika Shivar also became important members. These groups began to meet weekly or monthly.

Sakhi Sangam undertook a range of varied interventions. This included supporting the Balika Shivar. They helped create awareness and mobilise girls and young women to join the centres. They also followed up with those who were irregular by visiting them in their homes. They spoke to the family members and the girls to understand and help resolve the barriers that prevented their attendance and participation. They helped dispel myths and misconceptions about the open school system.

They also began to increasingly connect with panchayats and other community members to leverage resources for the Balika Shivar. This was a key area of contribution. They also reached out to relevant actors to help meet specific needs and concerns such as helping open new centres in Bikaner and Hazaribagh as highlighted earlier.

PROMISING PRACTICE

- Relevant
- Innovative
- Inclusive and respectful of participants
- Safe
- Accountable
- Effective
- Built/strengthened partnerships
- Contributed to systems strengthening
- Sustainable (partly)
- Replicable
- Scalable

The groups emerged as vibrant change agents and champions in their communities. They could take up a range of issues, identify and engage with relevant stakeholders as well as undertake persistent follow up to aid resolution of their concerns. Their efforts contributed to system strengthening as well – particularly in terms of enhancing access for girls, women and their communities to existing systems and services as well as encouraging greater responsiveness from panchayats, district and block level functionaries (multisectoral), NIOS and RSOS. At some locations, the groups did need additional/longer period of support to reach sustainability.)

Across locations, Sakhi Sangams stood up to counter child marriage. This included 37 recorded instances. They intervened in cases of domestic violence. Instances of groups preventing unsafe migration and trafficking of their peers also surfaced. For instance, in West Singhbhum, a Sakhi Sangam thwarted efforts of traffickers who wanted to take 28 young women for exploitative labour.

Menstrual health management emerged as another important domain of work. They connected with the frontline health workers and other government functionaries to aid access to sanitary pads for Balika Shivar girls. More importantly, they became drivers of community conversations that sought to break the taboo around discussing menstrual health.

Sakhi Sangams also played a vital role in creating awareness and helping peers and other community members access various government schemes and services. This included a focused engagement on this aspect through an internship programme in Hazaribagh initiated by the district administration and block administration (Churchu). This further led to three Sakhi Sangam members being recognised as Youth Icon for Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP). They had helped create awareness about electoral processes and enrol 56 first time voters (*see chapter 3 for more on Sakhi Sangam*).

7] Harnessing Volunteer Engagement Programme for Greater Benefits

- ▶ Academic and Non-academic Benefits
- ▶ Mutual learning
- ▶ Collective Actions

The Volunteer Engagement programme was initiated in April 2023 with specific interest from Z Zurich Foundation, the supporter of the project. Volunteers from Zurich interacted with girls from the Balika Shivar through video conferencing. They received an initial briefing and also signed Plan India's Safeguarding Policy. Seventeen such sessions were held where the volunteers and girls shared information about their geographic locations, cultures, weather, food, common crafts, popular sports etc. These were essentially ice breaking sessions. The Zurich volunteers also wrote 28 letters that also shared such information. The letters also encouraged the girls to identify and work towards their goals.

The component became more structured in the second year. A separate post for Volunteer Engagement Coordinator was added to shape the evolving efforts along with the field teams. An online planning meeting was organised with volunteers of Z Zurich Foundation to share the situational contexts of the girls and an overview of the project before the session. Simultaneously, the girls at Balika Shivar were informed about the objective of the volunteer programme. Further, verbal and written consent was taken from the girls for their participation.

Significantly, the one and a half hour sessions began to follow a specific template. Session plans were developed in English and shared with the volunteers beforehand. These were translated into Hindi as well for sharing with the girls. There was a conscious alignment of the sessions with the NIOS and RSOS curriculum to ensure that the interactions helped the girls in enhancing their understanding of content areas linked to their subjects. A facilitator guide was also developed with the session plans.

A pre-test was done at the beginning of the session after a round of introduction. The volunteers then conducted the session using presentation and discussions. Use of accessible and engaging videos was increasingly incorporated. They encouraged the girls to develop projects/models on various themes including pollution, rainwater harvesting etc. The girls also filled the post-test questionnaire at the end of the session. The volunteers then shared the correct answers. This helped gauge the uptake of inputs shared.

The second year saw another important addition. Girls who were currently in college from the local communities volunteered time at the Balika Shivar and taught specific subjects in keeping with their interest and expertise. This included painting, yoga, Hindi and Indian Culture. They were screened by the project teams in order to gauge their understanding of the concerned subjects and suitability for teaching. They also signed Plan India's Safeguarding Policy and the related do's and don'ts were explained to them. The Balika Shivar began to maintain a roster of these graduate girls to streamline their engagement. The graduate girls could also deepen their understanding of

the subjects as they instructed the Balika Shivar students. Some harboured interest in being teachers, and thus, could gain valuable experience in this manner. In all, 129 graduate girls contributed across the three years.

GOOD PRACTICE

- Relevant
- Innovative
- Inclusive and respectful of participants
- Safe
- Accountable
- Effective
- Built/strengthened partnerships
- Contributed to systems strengthening
- Sustainable
- Replicable
- Scalable

The Volunteer Engagement Programme grew into a substantial component that contributed academically and non-academically for the Balika Shivar girls. Volunteers from Z Zurich APAC and Middle East, graduate girls and local stakeholders brought their knowledge and experiences to the interactions with the girls. They too benefited from the engagement in multiple ways.

There were also increasing instances of local stakeholders stepping up. For instance, Physical Training instructors from Government schools spoke about careers in sports. A female police officer shared her journey from growing up in a village to becoming a law enforcement officer, inspiring 14 girls to apply for the Jharkhand police constable exam. Overall, 50 stakeholders were involved in various career counselling sessions.

A range of other initiatives were triggered by the volunteer interactions as well. For instance, input from a volunteer led Sakhi Sangam at a centre in Hazaribagh to undertake a health survey of community members. This led to the identification of 13 individuals with severe cough. With the help of the local frontline worker, they were tested for tuberculosis with nine confirmations. They began to receive appropriate treatment immediately. Sakhi Sangam also undertook awareness activities in the area on prevention of tuberculosis. Similarly, inputs from another volunteer spurred interest in kitchen garden. The volunteer had shared about using the kitchen waste as fertilizer. Four Sakhi Sangam leaders (who also studied at the Balika Shivar) had been awarded Rs 2,500 (29.20 USD) each as a token of appreciation for their efforts in preventing child marriages. The four leaders, spontaneously chose to use the money to initiate kitchen gardens in their homes.

By the end of the third year, 61 volunteers from Zurich APAC and Zurich Middle East had taken had taken sessions. The average scores of the girls in pre-test and post-test assessments stood at 47% and 84% respectively. This marked an improvement from year 2 pre and post-test assessments that stood at 36% and 79% respectively. There were, of course, benefits beyond the academic domain due to their inputs as well as the engagements with graduate girls and other stakeholders. Girls grew in confidence and communication skills, developed projects and undertook specific initiatives. The volunteers also benefited from the interactions with an enhanced understanding of diverse realities. They were also inspired by the life stories of the girls and their indomitable will and infectious enthusiasm.



8] Resource Leveraging Across the Districts

- ▶ Collective Action
- ▶ Sakhi Sangam
- ▶ Convergence
- ▶ Contributing to Systems Strengthening

Issue/Concern: The project aimed to encourage community ownership from the onset. This was also linked to an inherent emphasis on seeding sustainability and ensuring reduced dependence on the project. This focus took the shape of leveraging resources from communities, panchayats and other systemic actors. This would ensure that they grow as involved participants along with the initiatives and have a stake in their continuity as well.

Steps Taken: The Balika Shivar were consciously and strategically located in spaces shared by panchayats and local communities. This key step set the tone for subsequent project activities. Resources were leveraged, including by Sakhi Sangams from the local panchayats, for improving infrastructure at the centres, ensuring electricity and water supply etc. In Adsar (Bikaner), the panchayat took up the concerns related to the Balika Shivar (which needed significant renovation) and listed the work needed along with budget of Rs 5,00,000 (5841.12 USD). This was subsequently sanctioned and utilised accordingly.

Sakhi Sangams raised money to cover specific transport costs for girls and women when travelling to the open school exams. Families pitched in to pay fees for supplementary exams for the girls and young women as well. Gradually, communities began to pitch in and cover specific aspects when key days were commemorated. For instance, tents, tables, chairs, microphone etc would be arranged by them. There were some unexpected contributors as well. A school in Bikaner (Navodaya Vidyalaya) covered a significant portion of the costs when it hosted a football match for Balika Shivar girls.

GOOD PRACTICE

- Relevant
- Innovative
- Inclusive and respectful of participants
- Safe
- Accountable
- Effective
- Built/strengthened partnerships
- Contributed to systems strengthening
- Sustainable
- Replicable
- Scalable

The initiatives helped generate interest, ownership and accountability of those involved. This was particularly important in terms of encouraging panchayats to respond to local concerns related to second chance education. The proactive role of Sakhi Sangams as well as engagement of other communities members signified their emergence as involved actors in development processes that would benefit their girls and young women.



Community contributions were consciously promoted for NEET women as well. Thus, they were encouraged to increasingly cover part of the costs for the startup kits. For instance, in the second year, women in Udaipur raised Rs 3,59,880 (4204.2 USD) and purchased the chicks themselves from KVK Udaipur. Further, in Hazaribagh, 160 young women contributed INR 1,20,000 (1401.87 USD) to purchase mushroom seeds for business expansion. In the third year, women in Bikaner contributed Rs 35,000 (408.88 USD) for buying gas stoves,

utensils, and other materials. There were also instances where people volunteered as resource persons and waived their fees. This was also seen as community contribution. For instance, an independent entrepreneur with over 20 years of experience in handicrafts and embroidery provided four days of training free of cost. She usually charged Rs 5,000 (58.41 USD) per day. By year three, an impressive Rs 56,85,552 (66,420USD) was leveraged across the four districts.



Looking Back: Balika Shivar Timeline

[YEAR 1 : 2022-23]

- Recruitment undertaken.
- Training of teachers and cluster coordinators on teaching methodology.
- Identification of dropout girls and young women; engagement with them and their families.
- Balika Shivers initiated in community spaces with cultural and sports activities, followed by gradual introduction to academics.
- Formal project launch in 4 intervention districts in collaboration with district administration; nodal officer appointed by DCs.
- Enrolment of drop out girls in open school (NIOS/RSOS)
- Identification of NEET women and engagement with them and their families.
- Vocational training initiated for NEET women.
- Distribution of education kits and winter protection kits at Balika Shivers.
- Development of training manual for socio-emotional and accelerated learning.
- Training of Trainers (ToT) sessions on socio-emotional learning.
- Teachers' training on accelerated learning.
- Distribution of startup kits to NEET women.
- Initiation of Volunteer Engagement Programme with Z Zurich Foundation.
- Sakhi Sangam groups initiated.
- Facilitation of NIOS/RSOS exams – procedural formalities, preparation, and transport support.
- Sakhi Sangam groups begin leveraging resources to support Balika Shivers.



[YEAR 2 : 2023-24]

- Initiated admissions for NIOS/RSOS (next cohort).
- ASER Evaluation tool used for screening and grading girls and young women at Balika Shivirs.
- Introduction of Puwal mushroom cultivation in West Singhbhum.
- Felicitation of 5 Sakhi Sangam girls by District Administration in West Singhbhum for promoting girls' education.
- Appreciation letter received from the State Minister in Rajasthan for education and vocational training initiatives for NEET women in Bikaner.
- Identification of young women for vocational training (next cohort).
- Recruitment of two Livelihood Network Facilitators for Jharkhand and Rajasthan.
- NEET women formed steering committees for collective decision-making and ownership of poultry businesses in Udaipur.
- Distribution of bicycles to Balika Shivar girls commuting 5–11 kilometres.
- Distribution of cold-wave essentials and heatwave equipment to Balika Shivar girls in Bikaner.
- Financial literacy sessions initiated.
- Heatwave kits (water bottles, umbrellas) distributed at Balika Shivirs.
- Establishment of new examination centres in Bikaner and Hazaribagh in coordination with Open School.
- NEET women received support in market exploration and sales opportunities.
- FSSAI certification obtained in Bikaner and Hazaribagh.
- Women reinvested earnings to expand businesses.
- Legal literacy sessions for Sakhi Sangam members.
- Sakhi Sangam expanded initiatives to support education, prevent child marriage, trafficking, and domestic violence.



[YEAR 3 : 2024-25]

- Increased focus on foundational literacy at Balika Shivirs.
- Branding of NEET women food products: Sirawan (Bikaner) and Kawali (Hazaribagh).
- Entrepreneurship training developed for women in Rajasthan.
- Introduction of child marriage prevention and tracking register at block level in Hazaribagh.
- Sakhi Sangam members undertook a month-long internship in Churchu, Hazaribagh to encourage communities to access government schemes.
- Sakhi Sangam members participated in Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP), promoting voter rights; recognised as Youth Icons by the district.
- Development of a GP Mushroom Hub in Devkhuli, Hazaribagh
- Development of Process Document to capture the key processes, achievements and challenges of the project
- Development of Transformational Stories Document to capture the emerging innovative practices of Balika Shivar project
- Development of 15 films of Balika Shivar capturing the transformative impact of the project



Balika Shivar

Project In Numbers

Education

4441 girls and young women who had dropped out returned to education

NEET Women

3746 NEET women initiated livelihoods of their choice aligning with the market demands

8187 participants (drop out girls and young women) were impacted.

Sakhi Sangams formed:
135 groups with 20615 members

Child marriages prevented:
36

Volunteers involved:
61 (Zurich APAC and Middle East),
129 (graduate girls), 50 (local stakeholders)

Resources leveraged from communities and systemic actors:

Rs 56,85,552
(66,420 USD)

Resource leveraged through linkages with government schemes by girls, young women and their families:

Rs 1,90,79,000
(222,885.51 USD)



The Road Ahead





अमूल्य
मेें आपका
गा बहुमूल्य

The Balika Shivar project operationalised in Rajasthan and Jharkhand, India, during 2022-25 proved to be an important and enriching experience for Plan India and Z Zurich Foundation. It enabled a deeper understanding of the varied contexts, constraints and capabilities of girls and young women even as it accompanied them on incremental journeys of growth and transformations. The project also provided the opportunity to forge a constellation of key collaborative relationships with families and communities, PRIs, district and block administrations, education department functionaries as well as open school boards (NIOS and RSOS). Opportunities of collaborations with government/government affiliated bodies such as ICAR and KVK and with the State Livelihood Rural Missions (particularly JSLPS) could also be explored.

The programming components of second chance education and NEET women as well as the work with the Sakhi Sangams and Volunteer Engagement Programme remained intricately connected leading to larger, cumulative impacts. While a lot could be accomplished, much remains to be done as well. Possible areas of further attention and action, based on experiential insights gained, are outlined below.

RECOMMENDATIONS

EDUCATION

1. Greater convergence is needed among key systemic actors and the open school system

Convergence meetings held involving district and block administrations, education department functionaries, PRI representatives and NIOS and RSOS have been successful in generating greater understanding of the mandates and resources of these critical actors as well as finding solutions for concerns impeding second chance education. Such meetings do need to be regularised. A greater focus on convergence at the GP level can also contribute to a prospective model that encourages the complementary provisions of schooling under Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan and for accessing NIOS and RSOS for those who somehow slip through this/cannot benefit from regular schooling at the secondary and higher secondary levels. Moreover, the open school related centres (AI and examination

centres) are typically located in government schools. Greater engagement would then benefit them as well. It is also important to ensure such convergence at the state level. Periodic meetings/consultations can thus be considered.

2. Continue with awareness activities highlighting the value and benefits of the open school system

Persistent efforts by the project teams had helped create awareness about NIOS and RSOS in the project areas. However, it was also evident that such efforts needed to be continued, more so if new areas are considered for future programming. District and block administrations, education department functionaries (DEO, BEOs and PEEOs where so placed), local communities and panchayats need to be covered in the awareness initiatives. The frontline workers such as ASHAs, Anganwadi Sevikas and ANMs should also be briefed so that they can disseminate key messages and encourage second chance education where possible in their interactions with girls and women and their family members. The important supportive role of families, including male role models, in promoting second chance education should also be stressed.

3. At a broader level, electronic, print and radio media could be utilised more for awareness activities

NIOS related messages can be shared through Doordarshan (the national public broadcaster in India) and the popular FM radio channels. Girls who have passed out from NIOS can be involved in sharing their experiences and achievements in these promotional audio-visual materials.



4. Highlight the need for opening more centres for NIOS and RSOS

Access to NIOS and RSOS centres remains limited in remote geographies. Moreover, NIOS centres are typically located at the block level in the districts. NIOS and RSOS could consider data on drop out girls as well as undertake surveys/assessments to identify locations where new centres could be established. NGOs could aid in the data collation and survey/assessment processes as needed.

5. Explore possibility of waiving enrolment fees for girls and women for NIOS enrolment in Jharkhand

In RSOS, the Department of Women and Child Development, Government of Rajasthan, bears the costs of enrolment for girls and women. This, in turn, makes admission free for them which helps significantly, particularly those who are from impoverished and disadvantaged backgrounds. The possibility of the Government of Jharkhand taking up a similar approach for NIOS can be broached and explored. This would benefit girls and young women from tribal, remote locations as well as countless others for whom the fees could act as a disincentive.

6. Specific challenges in enrolment can be countered through collaborative efforts with open school system

The considerable challenges in obtaining SSOD for the girls and young women in Rajasthan has been mentioned earlier. A possible solution, suggested by Secretary – RSOS, is to **hold enrolment camps at the AI centres** wherein girls and parents/guardians can be guided for smooth enrolment at one go.

Further, orientations can be conducted for e-mitras in Rajasthan. The e-mitras, who run internet kiosks, help girls and their families with RSOS enrolment in Rajasthan. It is essential that they are oriented so that they can provide correct guidance and avoid taking decisions on behalf of the girls (such as choosing subjects for them)! This initiative can also be undertaken collaboratively with RSOS.

7. Support regularising of Personal Contact Programme in Jharkhand

The AI centres are

expected to conduct classes for those enrolled under NIOS through the Personal Contact Programme. However, this was often not done. This can be an area of input where project teams engage with the AI centres and encourage regularising of these classes. The AI centres are also eligible for receiving specified funds for these classes. This aspect, identified by the Assistant Director-NIOS in an interaction, can also be highlighted.

8. Foundational literacy is a must

The academic component in any subsequent programming on second chance education must include foundational literacy in a structured manner. This is essential considering the substantial educational deficits that persist. As mentioned earlier, many girls and young women were found to struggle with writing sentences in Hindi. This focus is also needed considering that Hindi is often the second language for many learners.

Project experiences showed that the substantial educational deficits made the goal of qualifying class X particularly challenging. Future programming efforts can consider the possibility of including **qualifying class VIII as the primary goal**, followed by class X and XII (as contextually feasible).

9. Enhanced use of books and other resources in local languages to aid gradual transition

It will be useful if educational materials can be developed in local languages. For instance, stories in Ho will hold more relevance for students in West Singhbhum. Such resources could help spark interest. Subsequently, digital story telling videos can be used. This can aid transition to greater use of Hindi as well.

10. West Singhbhum requires sustained and strategic attention

West Singhbhum, while rich in mineral resources, also ranks as one of the aspirational districts in India that require greater attention to enhance key development indicators as listed by Niti Ayog³⁰. The project experiences have also highlighted the need for sustained and long-term inputs and

support for improving second chance education outcomes considering remote geographies, overarching influence of socio-cultural norms and lack of familiarity with Hindi language which impacts educational performance. A fast-track approach with expectations of quick results would not work here.

11. Integrate inputs on online risks at Balika Shivar

Considering the rapid spread of online abuse and exploitation, it is imperative that related inputs are provided at Balika Shivar. This can include essential measures for keeping oneself safe in online engagements, handling social media and reporting channels for any inappropriate or abusive contact and content.

12. Reflect on and decide on boundaries of engagement

Mainstreaming of girls and young women in schools and colleges represents a significant achievement. The teams have also undertaken periodic check-ins with the schools and students as feasible. It is important to reflect on these experiences and gauge the extent and frequency of such follow ups that can be undertaken. This is a substantial area of work in itself and, therefore, conscious and strategic decisions need to be made.

NEET WOMEN & LIVELIHOODS

1. Strengthen the continuum of change

Future programming efforts can consciously and strategically choose to include all young women at Balika Shivar (once they cross 18 years) under the NEET component. This focus would provide a longer and deeper engagement that helps a particular cohort of girls and young women to gain greater confidence and agency while improving on educational and livelihood outcomes. This was initiated during the project period for particularly vulnerable women and also as a strategy for aiding those who wished to study further (for instance – earning from livelihoods could support covering college fees).

2. Ensure conscious emphasis on the underlying gendered and other social norms and interrelated domains that affect women

Women's participation in labour remains dependent on a host of factors. Gendered roles and expectations remain particularly significant. This manifests in multiple ways including a higher burden of caregiving that leaves less time for other engagements. Moreover, responsibilities for child care – more so in large families and when there are illnesses – adversely impact livelihood as well. Women tend to postpone seeking health services for themselves as well. Thus, reproductive and sexual health as well as maternal and child health become determinants that need to be factored.

3. Explore ways of continuing support for the women

The collaborative relationships forged with ICAR and KVKs should be leveraged for future support for the NEET women as well. The interest shown by panchayats and block administrations is another vital dimension. They can be encouraged to take ownership in guiding the women. The work with the GP level mushroom hub had highlighted the scope of integrating such work in the annual GPDP. This offers an exciting and sustainable option. State Rural Livelihood Missions, such as JSLPS and Rajeevika, can be engaged more through the Panchayats and Block administrations as well.

4. Step up investments in master trainers

A growing nucleus of master trainers emerged from the districts. These women must be supported so that they understand and fulfil their roles in terms of aiding their peers. The possible accreditation of master trainers under JSLPS in West Singhbhum is a significant step forward that will aid their sustainability as well. This opportunity



³⁰ It is the nodal policy level think tank for the Government of India shaping the country's development agenda and initiatives.

can be explored in Jharkhand as well. The provision of specialised training for them offered by ICAR should also be followed up and secured.

5. Reaffirm inputs on market linkages and incremental scaling up of livelihood initiatives

Overall, it was found that several groups asked for further inputs on market linkages. This is a vital aspect and should be covered more in the structured trainings as well as follow up support. The work done on identifying range of available markets, for various livelihoods as applicable, with the related advantages and disadvantages needs to be continued. At the same time, key messages related to the product quality and other desired parameters should also be reiterated.

6. Emphasis on community contributions remains essential

The project encouraged women to, gradually, contribute costs for the startup kits. The women also increasingly began to reinvest the income in buying more materials/chicks for subsequent cycles. The role of the steering committee in poultry initiatives in Udaipur has been highlighted earlier. These examples helped prove that community contributions aid greater engagement and ownership, which also contribute to reduced dependence on project efforts. This, in turn, aids sustainability as well.

SAKHI SANGAM

1. Refreshers needed on key issues including where legal aspects are involved

Sakhi Sangam members interacted with remained eager to learn. Their evolving experiences in dealing with child marriage, unsafe migration and trafficking as well as other issues such as alternative care for vulnerable children indicated the need for being updated. This included relevant Acts and associated legal procedures.

2. More confidence building and longer period of support needed to enable groups to move beyond the block level

So far, it seemed that the group members were most comfortable in approaching panchayats for their concerns. A sizeable number had gained



confidence in moving up to the block level where needed. There was a certain familiarity with district level functionaries. However, this did vary across the districts. Also, comparatively, Sakhi Sangams would need more time and inputs to reach a degree of confidence and comfort to work at the district level.

3. Consider linkages between Sakhi Sangam and other existing groups and structures

Girls (below 18 years) who are active Sakhi Sangam members can be considered for inclusion in the Child Protection Committees functional under Mission Vatsalya. They can become vital representatives and share concerns affecting them and their peers and contribute to finding solutions along with the other mandated representatives of these committees at various levels at the village and block levels. This participation may also infuse further energy and momentum for the Sakhi Sangams too. Other available platforms for adolescent girls (such as Kishori Samuh at Anganwadi Centres) can also be considered.

4. Sustainability of Sakhi Sangams

The groups, understandably, are at varied points in their journeys of change. Some still need support to stabilise, especially those anchored to Balika Shivirs that opened later in the project period. Possibilities of bringing the Sakhi Sangam leaders together at the district level and providing periodic guidance can be considered.

CROSS CUTTING

1. Explore more opportunities for cross learning

This is true for the project teams as well as the key participants – girls and young women at Balika Shivar, NEET women and other members of Sakhi Sangam. Such efforts were undertaken during the project period. However, these can be stepped up further. Male role models can also be involved in cross learning efforts. These can be undertaken online as well as offline.

2. Consider engagement with GDPD for sustainability

The annual Gram Panchayat Development Plan cycle offers an important pathway for participatory, development processes. Under the revamped Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA, 2022-23 – 2025-26), GDPD has been aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. Nine key themes have been identified which include child friendly and women friendly panchayat. These themes are particularly important in terms of the project's focus areas. Though second chance education does not feature explicitly, it can be integrated as a complimentary component to an identified priority area – reducing drop outs. The scope of including awareness activities by Sakhi Sangams on social issues (such as preventing child marriages, child trafficking and child labour) can be considered too. Moreover, women friendly panchayat encourages attention

on transition rates from primary to upper primary and secondary levels for girls. Further, the work on promoting women's engagement in livelihoods can be located within women friendly GP as indicated by the Devkhuli example (GP level mushroom hub). Significantly, the number of women SHGs and those accessing bank loans are tracked in this theme. Such integration will ensure greater convergence of strengths and resources between systemic actors, communities and Plan India and aid sustainability.

3. Deepen the work on gender transformative programming

The Balika Shivar project helped illustrate the value of gender transformative programming. As the preceding chapters show, it acknowledged and worked on social and gendered norms that constrained girls and women and contributed significantly to enhance their agency. There was a conscious emphasis on working collectively with a range of stakeholders to promote an enabling environment for them. It also worked with fathers, brothers, husbands and fathers-in-law. Male role models also emerged. It is important to enhance work on this critical aspect including bringing in boys and young men into dialogues on gender. Their understanding and experiences, including the diversity therein, should also be factored in. After all, gender transformative change must include aiding them in escaping norms and stereotypes that bind them and support their growth in embracing positive masculinities.





उदयपुर, राजस्थान

[f PlanIndiaNGO](#)

[t Plan_India](#)

[i PlanIndia](#)

[in Plan_India](#)



ANNEXURE I

Process Documentation Methodology

The process documentation of Balika Shivar: Accelerated Learning Centre for Girls drew from principles and practice of process documentation as well as qualitative research. It was also informed by the good practice documentation body of work. Practices were identified and screened along pre-determined criteria. The consultant adhered to Plan India's policies and instructions related to safeguarding children and programme participants. There was an emphasis on respect, informed consent, confidentiality and Do No Harm principles across the stages of the exercise.

Preparatory Phase

The exercise was initiated with *preliminary online meetings with the project teams and sharing of documents related to the project*. This included a brief introductory meeting followed by a series of detailed discussions (through three-hour meetings) with the project coordinators and cluster coordinators from the four locations (i.e., Bikaner, Udaipur, Hazaribagh and West Singhbhum). The Project Manager and Project Coordinator – Volunteer Engagement Programme made the necessary arrangements and participated actively as well.

Field plans for Bikaner and Udaipur emerged from these discussions and initial readings. Multistakeholder participants were identified through *purposive sampling* in consultation with the field teams and the Project Manager to ensure that various nuances were captured. Focus groups discussions, semi structured interviews and group interviews (where needed) were to be utilised (*key methods*). The areas of enquiry for the related tools were drawn from the team meetings.

Fieldwork

[Bikaner and Udaipur, Rajasthan, February 12- 19, 2025] The visits included a *full day team meeting* to provide ample scope for consolidating their experiences and insights. This included *milestone mapping* wherein team members recalled and noted turning points, modification in strategies, successes and other developments in the project's journey. *Discussions on key components* of the project was preceded by a *quiz* which generated enthusiastic response. Team members, particularly the teachers, also *traced their personal journeys* with the project

Identified stakeholder participants were engaged with. This included *Girls in Balika Shivar *Sakhi Sangam (girls and women; including Balika Shivar alumni) *NEET women engaged in livelihoods after receiving vocational training *Family members of Balika Shivar girls and NEET women (parent/husband/in laws) *Gram Panchayat/ related representative *Rajasthan State Open School Centre in-charge *Education department functionaries. Additionally, Panchayat Samiti Pradhan was also met in Udaipur. Home visits were undertaken for some of the Balika Shivar girls and NEET

women. Overall, there was an emphasis on creating a welcoming and supportive environment for the conversations, particularly for girls and women.

[New Delhi, February 20-21, 2025] Brief discussions were held with **Deputy Director - Grants and Director - Grants (Plan India)** to take their suggestions for the process documentation exercise. Further, **discussions were held with the Project Manager and Coordinator - Volunteer Engagement Programme**. An **online meeting** was held **with Regional Engagement Manager Asia Pacific, Z Zurich Foundation** to take her inputs and suggestions.

[Hazaribagh and West Singhbhum, March 31 – April 4, 2025] A similar process of developing field plans was undertaken. The field visits were completed accordingly with a similar set of stakeholder participants.

[April 20 – May 3, 2025; Telephonic and online] Further, **interactions with Secretary – RSOS and Assistant Director – NIOS** were completed. Inputs were received from **JSLPS district and block functionaries** in West Singhbhum.

Data Consolidation, Analysis and Report

Data collated through fieldwork was **consolidated**. This primarily included qualitative data. Quantitative data, as available, was utilised as well. Overall, there was an emphasis on capturing contexts, inputs and processes, modifications/adaptations, results as well as actionable insights. Innovations, promising and good practices were also finalised. Recommendations for future work were drawn. **A draft structure was first shared** and finalised. Subsequently, the **full draft** was developed and shared with Plan India and Z Zurich Foundation. The process document was finalised with their feedback.

ANNEXURE II

Notes of Appreciation & Support



प्रशंसा प्रमाण पत्र

में हजारीबाग जिले के ईचाक ब्लॉक के देवखुली पंचायत में मशरूम की खेती प्रशिक्षण कार्यक्रम आयोजित करने के लिए बालिका शिविर परियोजना के तहत प्लान इंडिया द्वारा किए गए सराहनीय कार्य के लिए हार्दिक प्रशंसा व्यक्त करता हूँ। यह पहल महिलाओं को आवश्यक कौशल से लैस करके, आर्थिक सशक्तिकरण को सक्षम बनाने, स्थायी आजीविका के अवसर पैदा करने, और समुदाय के भीतर आर्थिक स्वतंत्रता के मार्ग खोलने में सहायक रही है।

प्रशिक्षण ने न केवल व्यावहारिक ज्ञान प्रदान किया है, बल्कि प्रतिभागियों को नए आर्थिक रास्ते तलाशने के लिए प्रेरित भी किया है, जिससे क्षेत्र के समग्र विकास में योगदान मिला है। यह पहल वास्तव में सामुदायिक सशक्तिकरण और सकारात्मक, स्थायी परिवर्तन के प्रति आपके समर्पण को दर्शाती है।

प्रखंड विकास पदाधिकारी (Block Development Officer) के रूप में, मुझे ईचाक ब्लॉक में एक "मशरूम हब पंचायत" स्थापित करने के लिए अपना पूर्ण समर्थन और मार्गदर्शन प्रदान करते हुए खुशी हो रही है। इस पहल में समुदाय के लिए महत्वपूर्ण आर्थिक और सामाजिक लाभ लाने की अपार क्षमता है और यह क्षेत्र में मशरूम की खेती की सफलता को और बढ़ाएगी।

सामुदायिक विकास में आपके अमूल्य योगदान के लिए एक बार फिर धन्यवाद। मैं हमारे सहयोग को मजबूत करने और हमारे समुदायों को ऊपर उठाने और सशक्त बनाने वाली प्रभावशाली पहलों पर एक साथ काम करने की आशा करता हूँ।

मंजु देवी
Mukhiya

Devkhuli Panchayat of Ichak block

मुखिया
ग्राम पंचायत-देवखुली
इचाक, हजारीबाग

03/01/25
Block Development officer
Ichak Block, Hazaribagh District
प्रखण्ड विकास पदाधिकारी
ईचाक, हजारीबाग



CERTIFICATE OF APPRECIATION

I extend my heartfelt appreciation for the commendable work undertaken by Plan India under the Balika Shivar project in organizing the mushroom cultivation training program in Devkhuli Panchayat, Ichak Block, Hazaribagh District, Jharkhand. This initiative has been instrumental in enabling the financial empowerment of women by equipping them with essential skills, creating sustainable livelihood opportunities, and opening up pathways for economic independence within the community.

The training has not only provided practical knowledge but has also motivated participants to explore new economic avenues, thereby contributing to the overall development of the region. This initiative truly reflects your dedication to community empowerment and positive, lasting change.

As the Block Development Officer, I am pleased to offer my full support and guidance in establishing a "Mushroom Hub Panchayat" in Ichak Block. This initiative has immense potential to bring significant economic and social benefits to the community and will further enhance the success of mushroom cultivation in the region.

Thank you once again for your invaluable contribution to community development. I look forward to strengthening our collaboration and working together on impactful initiatives that uplift and empower our communities.

मंजु देवी
Mukhiya

Devkhuli Panchayat of Ichak block

मुखिया
ग्राम-पंचायत-देवकुली
इचाक, हजारीबाग

03/01/25
Block Development officer
Ichak Block, Hazaribagh District
ग्रखण्ड विकास पदाधिकारी
इचाक, हजारीबाग



प्रशंसा प्रमाण पत्र

प्रिय प्लान इंडिया टीम,

में हजारीबाग के चुरचू ब्लॉक में आपके द्वारा किए जा रहे उत्कृष्ट कार्य के लिए हार्दिक प्रशंसा और बधाई व्यक्त करने के लिए लिख रहा हूँ। बालिका शिविर: लड़कियों के लिए त्वरित शिक्षण केंद्र के माध्यम से आपके प्रयासों ने इस क्षेत्र में उल्लेखनीय प्रभाव डाला है, और हम कमजोर लड़कियों और युवा महिलाओं को सशक्त बनाने के लिए आपके समर्पण की सराहना करते हैं।

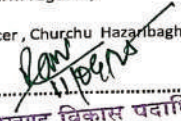
पिछले तीन वर्षों में, आपकी पहल ने सफलतापूर्वक स्कूल छोड़ चुकी किशोरियों को नामांकित और समर्थित किया है, जिससे वे अपनी माध्यमिक और उच्च माध्यमिक शिक्षा पूरी करने में सक्षम हुई हैं। यह एक महत्वपूर्ण उपलब्धि है जो उनके भविष्य और उन समुदायों को आकार दे रही है जिनसे वे संबंधित हैं। इसके अतिरिक्त, मशरूम उत्पादन, मुर्गी पालन और अचार बनाने में NEET (नॉट इन एजुकेशन, एम्प्लॉयमेंट, और ट्रेनिंग) युवा महिलाओं के लिए आपके प्रशिक्षण कार्यक्रमों ने न केवल उन्हें आर्थिक रूप से सशक्त बनाया है, बल्कि सामूहिक उद्यमिता की भावना को भी बढ़ावा दिया है।

हम आपकी अभिनव बाल विवाह रोकथाम और ट्रेकिंग रजिस्टर पहल की भी सराहना करते हैं, जिसका दूरगामी प्रभाव पड़ा है। हजारीबाग जिले के सभी ब्लॉकों में इसका दोहराव (replication) बाल विवाह को खत्म करने और युवा लड़कियों के अधिकारों की रक्षा की दिशा में एक सशक्त कदम है।

सामाजिक परिवर्तन और सतत विकास के प्रति आपका समर्पण वास्तव में प्रेरणादायक है। हमें हजारीबाग में हो रहे सकारात्मक परिवर्तनों को देखकर गर्व महसूस हो रहा है, और हम भविष्य में और भी बड़ी प्रगति देखने की उम्मीद करते हैं। इतने सारे लोगों के जीवन में इतना बड़ा अंतर लाने के लिए आपकी अटूट प्रतिबद्धता के लिए एक बार फिर धन्यवाद।

Warm regards,

Block Development officer, Churchu Hazaribagh,
Jharkhand.


प्रखण्ड विकास पदाधिकारी
चुरचू (हजारीबाग)



CERTIFICATE OF APPRECIATION

Dear Plan India Team,

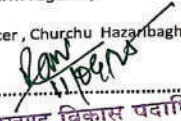
I am writing to extend our heartfelt appreciation and congratulations for the exceptional work you are doing in Churchu, block of Hazaribagh. Your efforts through the **Balika Shivir: Accelerated Learning Centres for Girls** have made a remarkable impact in the region, and we applaud your dedication to empowering vulnerable girls and young women.

Over the past three years, your initiative has successfully enrolled and supported Adolescent dropout girls, enabling them to complete their secondary and senior-secondary education. This is a significant achievement that is shaping their futures and the communities that they belong to. Additionally, your training programs for NEET young women in mushroom production, poultry farming, pickle making have not only empowered them financially but have also fostered a spirit of collective entrepreneurship. **We also commend your innovative Child Marriage Prevention and Tracking Register initiative, which has had a far-reaching impact.** Its replication across all blocks of Hazaribagh district is a powerful step toward eradicating child marriage and protecting young girls' rights.

Your dedication to social change and sustainable development is truly inspiring. We are proud to see the positive transformations in Hazaribagh, and we look forward to seeing even greater strides in the future. Thank you once again for your unwavering commitment and the immense difference you are making in the lives of so many.

Warm regards,

Block Development officer, Churchu Hazaribagh,
Jharkhand.


प्रखण्ड विकास पदाधिकारी
चुरुचू (हजारीबाग)

मुखिया
पूनम बेशरा
ग्राम पंचायत, चुरचू
फोन नं०: 8809988773, 8809768773



निवास स्थान
ग्राम-बोदरा, बागजोबरा
थाना - चुरचू पोस्ट-चुरचू
प्रखण्ड-चुरचू, जिला हजारीबाग
पिन कोड: 825302

पत्रांक... 188/2025

दिनांक... 16/05/2025

विषय: Plan India द्वारा क्षेत्र में किए गए सहयोग हेतु धन्यवाद एवं प्रशंसा।

महोदय/महोदया,

मैं, मुखिया चुरचू पंचायत की ओर से, **Plan India** को हार्दिक धन्यवाद देती हूँ। Plan India द्वारा हमारी पंचायत में चलाए गए बालिका शिविर प्रोजेक्ट जैसे प्रभावी कार्यक्रमों के माध्यम से ड्रॉपआउट किशोरी बालिकाओं को शिक्षित और जागरूक करने का जो कार्य किया गया है, वह अत्यंत प्रशंसनीय है। आपके सहयोग से हमारी पंचायत में अब कोई भी किशोरी ड्रॉपआउट नहीं है, जो हमारे लिए गर्व की बात है।

“Zero Dropout पंचायत” के रूप में घोषित होना हमारे लिए एक महत्वपूर्ण उपलब्धि है, जो आपके सतत प्रयासों और मार्गदर्शन के बिना संभव नहीं हो पाता। आपके संगठन ने न केवल किशोरीयों को शिक्षा से जोड़ा, बल्कि अभिभावकों और समुदाय में भी शिक्षा के प्रति जागरूकता उत्पन्न की।

इस सराहनीय कार्य के लिए Plan India की पूरी टीम को अपनी ओर से तथा पंचायत की जनता की ओर से धन्यवाद देती हूँ और आशा करती हूँ कि भविष्य में भी आप इसी प्रकार सहयोग करते रहेंगे।

सादर,
श्रीमती पूनम बेशरा
मुखिया, पंचायत - चुरचू
प्रखंड - चुरचू, जिला - हजारीबाग
हस्ताक्षर:

मुखिया
ग्राम पंचायत चुरचू
प्रखण्ड-चुरचू
जिला-हजारीबाग

मुखिया
पूनम बेशरा
ग्राम पंचायत, चुरचू
फोन नं०: 8809988773, 8809768773



निवास स्थान
ग्राम-बोदरा, बागजोबरा
थाना - चुरचू पोस्ट-चुरचू
प्रखण्ड-चुरचू जिला हजारीबाग
पिन कोड: 825302

पत्रांक... 188/2025

दिनांक... 16/05/2025

Subject: Thanks and appreciation for the cooperation extended by Plan India in the area.

Sir/Madam,

I, on behalf of the Mukhiya (Village Head) of Churchu Panchayat, extend my heartfelt thanks to Plan India. The work done by **Plan India** through effective programs like the Balika Shivar Project in our Panchayat—to educate and raise awareness among adolescent dropout girls—is highly commendable. It is a matter of pride for us that, with your support, there are now no dropout adolescent girls in our Panchayat.

Achieving the status of a “**Zero Dropout Panchayat**” is a significant milestone for us, one that would not have been possible without your continuous efforts and guidance. Your organization has not only connected adolescents with education but has also generated awareness about education among guardians and the community at large.

For this commendable work, I extend my thanks to the entire Plan India team on my own behalf and on behalf of the people of the Panchayat, and I hope that you will continue to cooperate in the same manner in the future.

सादर,
श्रीमती पूनम बेशरा
मुखिया, पंचायत - चुरचू
प्रखंड - चर्चू, जिला - हजारीबाग
हस्ताक्षर:

16/5/2025
मुखिया
ग्राम पंचायत चुरचू
प्रखण्ड-चुरचू
जिला-हजारीबाग

भंवर सिंह भाटी
राज्य मंत्री



ऊर्जा (स्वतंत्र प्रभार),
जल संसाधन, इंदिरा गाँधी नहर परियोजना एवं
जल संसाधन (आयोजना) विभाग
राजस्थान सरकार, जयपुर - 302005

SM/Raj/2023/Msg/3184
दिनांक :- 06/08/2023

“प्रशस्ति-पत्र”

मुझे यह जानकर अत्यंत प्रसन्नता हुई है कि, “प्लान इंडिया” विगत 01 वर्ष से बीकानेर जिले में बालिका शिक्षा उन्नयन एवं युवा महिलाओं को व्यावसायिक कौशल प्रशिक्षण के क्षेत्र में बेहतरीन कार्य कर रहा है। संस्था द्वारा बालिका शिविर परियोजना के माध्यम से ड्रॉप-आउट बालिकाओं की शिक्षा में महत्वपूर्ण योगदान दिया जा रहा है। मुझे अवगत करवाया गया है कि, प्लान इंडिया के माध्यम से बीकानेर जिले के दूरस्थ ग्रामीण क्षेत्र में लगभग 500 ड्रॉप-आउट बालिकाओं को राजस्थान स्टेट ओपन स्कूल (RSOS) में नामांकित किया गया है। मेरे द्वारा श्रीकोलायत ब्लॉक के ग्राम मोटावातान में प्लान इंडिया द्वारा संचालित बालिका शिविर का पर्यवेक्षण भी किया गया है। महिलाओं को आत्मनिर्भर बनाने और स्वरोजगार के अवसर उपलब्ध करवाने में भी प्लान इंडिया के व्यावसायिक प्रशिक्षण शिविर कारगर हैं।

बीकानेर जिले के सुदूर मरुस्थलीय ग्रामीण क्षेत्र में प्लान इंडिया के समाज उपयोगी कार्य सराहनीय है, इसके लिए मैं समस्त प्लान इंडिया टीम को आभार एवं बधाई प्रेषित करता हूँ।


(भंवर सिंह भाटी)

प्रतिष्ठा मे,
श्री ज्ञानेन्द्र श्रीमाली
परियोजना समन्वयक
प्लान इंडिया, बीकानेर।

भंवर सिंह भाटी
राज्य मंत्री



ऊर्जा (स्वतंत्र प्रभार),
जल संसाधन, इंदिरा गाँधी नहर परियोजना एवं
जल संसाधन (आयोजना) विभाग
राजस्थान सरकार, जयपुर - 302005

SM/Raj/2023/Msg/3184
दिनांक :- 06/08/2023

CERTIFICATE OF APPRECIATION

I am extremely pleased to know that "Plan India" has been doing excellent work for the past 01 year in Bikaner district in the field of girls' education enhancement and vocational skill training for young women. The organization is making a significant contribution to the education of dropout girls through the Balika Shivar Project. I have been informed that approximately 500 dropout girls in the remote rural areas of Bikaner district have been enrolled in the Rajasthan State Open School (RSOS) through Plan India. I have also personally supervised the Balika Shivar conducted by Plan India in Motawatan village of Sriko-lyat block. Plan India's vocational training camps are effective in making women self-reliant and providing opportunities for self-employment.

Plan India's socially useful work in the remote desert rural area of Bikaner district is commendable. For this, I express my gratitude and congratulations to the entire Plan India team.


(भंवर सिंह भाटी)

प्रतिष्ठा मे,
श्री ज्ञानेन्द्र श्रीमाली
परियोजना समन्वयक
प्लान इंडिया, बीकानेर।

Recognitions & Appreciations

Awards



Global Award in the category of Youth Collective Power at the Plan Point Awards instituted by Plan International



Plan India Impact Award two times in the category of Best Change Maker and Best Self Help Group

Recognitions



District administration of Hazaribagh and West Singhbhum acknowledged Balika Shivar project for its outstanding impact



Appreciation from State Minister in Rajasthan, for outstanding contribution of Balika Shivar project in ensuring education and providing vocational education for young women in Bikaner



On International Women's Day (8 March 2024), District Collector of Hazaribagh, Ms. Nancy Sahay, awarded **four Balika Shivar** (Sakhi Sangam) leaders **Rs. 10,000** and certificates for preventing child marriages and supporting school re-enrolment of dropout girls.



Four girls from Hazaribagh were selected as **Youth Icons** by the Deputy Election Commissioner (IAS) to lead a campaign on voting rights. They raised awareness on free and fair elections through street plays



Felicitations and Appreciation of Sakhi Sangam girls by District Administration in West Singhbhum for their contribution in promoting girls education

List of Appreciation Letters Received from Government Departments

S.No.	Appreciation letter received from Departments	Designation of the Government Official	Name of the Govt. Official
1	Government of Rajasthan	Government of Rajasthan Water and Electricity Minister, Jaipur	Bhanwar Singh Bhati
2	Department of School Education, Government of Rajasthan	Chief District Education Officer (Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan), Bikaner	Mahendra Kumar Sharma
3	Department of Secondary Education, Government of Rajasthan	District Education Officer (Secondary), Bikaner, Rajasthan	Surendra Singh Bhati
4	Department of Women, Child Development and Social Security, Government of Jharkhand	District Social Welfare Officer, Hazaribagh	Shipra Sinha
5	Department of Women, Child Development and Social Security, Government of Jharkhand	District Social Welfare Officer, Hazaribagh	Indu Kholke
6	Rural Development Department, Government of Jharkhand	Block Development Officer, Ichak Block, Hazaribagh	Santosh Kumar
7	Rural Development Department, Government of Jharkhand	Block Development Officer, Churchu Block, Hazaribagh	Lalit Ram
8	Department of Women, Child Development and Social Security, Government of Jharkhand	Child Development Project Officer (CDPO), Churchu Block, Hazaribagh	Rekha Rani
9	Panchayati Raj Department, Government of Rajasthan	Chairperson of Block Panchayat Samiti, Jhadol Block, Udaipur	Radha Devi Parmar
10	Revenue Department, Government of Rajasthan	Tehsildar, Falodi Tehsil, Ghatiyali Block, Jodhpur	Anoparam
11	Revenue Department, Government of Rajasthan	Naib Tehsildar, Lunkansar Tehsil, Lunkansar Block, Bikaner	Mamata
12	Panchayati Raj Department, Government of Rajasthan	Secretary of Gram Panchayat, Makdadev, Jhadol-Udaipur	Birbal Kumar Meena
13	Panchayati Raj Department, Government of Jharkhand	Mukhiya, Devkuli Panchayat, Ichak Block, Hazaribagh	Manju Devi
14	Panchayati Raj Department, Government of Jharkhand	Mukhiya, Rola Panchayat, Block: Sadar	Dinesh Kumar
15	Panchayati Raj Department, Government of Jharkhand	Mukhiya, Churchu Panchayat, Churchu Block, Hazaribagh	Punam Beshra
16	Department of School Education, Government of Rajasthan	Additional Centre In-Charge, Rajasthan State Open School (RSOS), Jhadol Block, Udaipur	Padam Prakash Jain

Balika Shivir In the News

प्लान इंडिया की कार्यशाला में सम्मानित

हजारों बच्चों को शिक्षित करने के लक्ष्य के अन्तर्गत कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।



कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

राष्ट्रीय बालिका दिवस पर कार्यशाला, बेटी-बचाओ-बेटी पढ़ाओ पर जोर

हजारों बच्चों को शिक्षित करने के लक्ष्य के अन्तर्गत कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।



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कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

प्रखंड मुख्यालय चुरचू में मतदान जागरूकता कार्यक्रम का आयोजन

मतदान जागरूकता कार्यक्रम का आयोजन किया गया।



कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

माता-पिता कर रहे थे नाबालिग की शादी, बच्ची ने रुकवाया सहपाठी का बाल विवाह, जिना प्रशासन ने किया सम्मानित....

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कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

अंतरराष्ट्रीय बालिका दिवस पर बेटी बचाओ बेटी पढ़ाओ तहत कार्यक्रम आयोजित

अंतरराष्ट्रीय बालिका दिवस पर बेटी बचाओ बेटी पढ़ाओ तहत कार्यक्रम आयोजित किया गया।



कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

किशोरियों को शिक्षित करने का संकल्प

किशोरियों को शिक्षित करने का संकल्प लिया गया।



कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

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प्लान इंडिया के सहयोग से स्वास्थ्य केंद्रों में गैलरी स्तरीय कार्यशाला का आयोजन

प्लान इंडिया के सहयोग से स्वास्थ्य केंद्रों में गैलरी स्तरीय कार्यशाला का आयोजन किया गया।



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कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

प्रखंड मुख्यालय चुरचू में सर्टिफिकेट वितरण

प्रखंड मुख्यालय चुरचू में सर्टिफिकेट वितरण किया गया।



कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

तसनालों में मनाया गया अंतरराष्ट्रीय महिला दिवस

तसनालों में मनाया गया अंतरराष्ट्रीय महिला दिवस।



कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

प्रखंड मुख्यालय चुरचू में सर्टिफिकेट वितरण किया गया

प्रखंड मुख्यालय चुरचू में सर्टिफिकेट वितरण किया गया।



कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

'मईयां सम्मान योजना' अंतर्गत महिलाओं को झारखंड सरकार देगा 1000 प्रति माह

'मईयां सम्मान योजना' अंतर्गत महिलाओं को झारखंड सरकार देगा 1000 प्रति माह।



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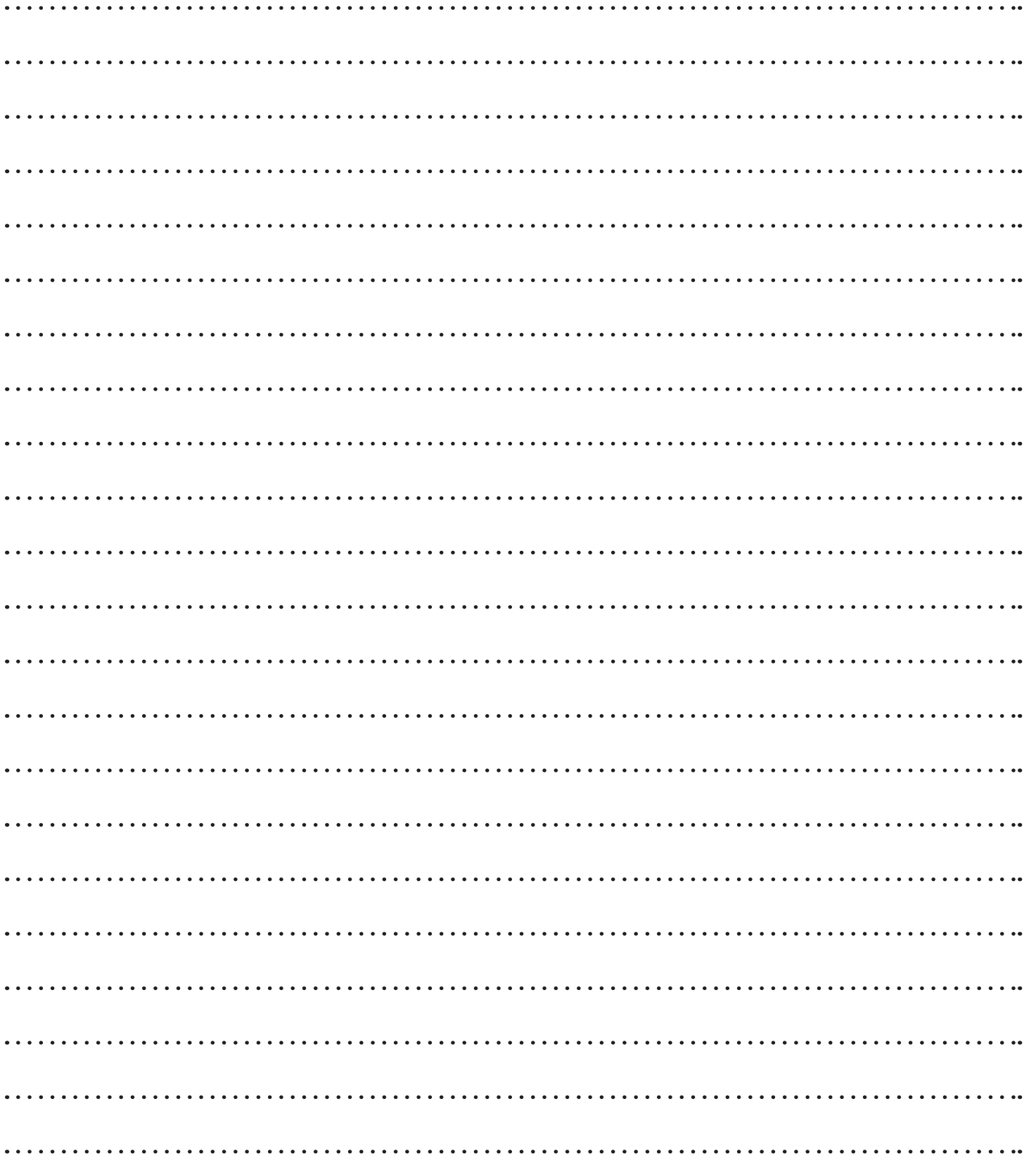
महिलाओं को मातृत्व लाभ वितरण को लेकर दिया गया प्रशिक्षण

महिलाओं को मातृत्व लाभ वितरण को लेकर दिया गया प्रशिक्षण।



कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।

कार्यशाला में सम्मानित किया गया।





www.planindia.org

1, Community Centre, Zamrudpur, Kailash Colony Extension

New Delhi - 110048, India

Tel: +91-11-46558484 | Fax: +91-11-46558443 | Email: planindia@planindia.org

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