

Building Women's Empowerment in India

Soma Chaudhuri, Ph.D.
Michigan State University

Kumvar, a Hindu wage laborer and single mother of four daughters, lives in rural Gujarat, India. Her husband abandoned the family shortly after the birth of their youngest daughter. He beat Kumvar daily, whom the family blamed for delivering daughters. The family wanted to get rid of Kumvar and her children so that the husband could marry again and have a son from a new wife. Her in-laws also pressured Kumvar to handover her two oldest daughters so they could sell them through a local arranged marriage practice called *satta*. Her brother, who had initially promised to care for these two daughters, is now looking for an opportunity to sell the girls. He wants to use the money to find a good marriage match for his son.

Sugra, a divorced Muslim woman and a mother of two teenaged children, lives a few kilometers from Kumvar's village. Sugra's step-mother had married her off through *satta* as the third wife of a much older man. Her husband and his second wife regularly abused Sugra and her young children. They were beaten, starved, and denied medical treatment for the injuries. Her husband often raped Sugra. When the violence became too much for her to bear, Sugra confided in her brother and father, who helped her find a lawyer with whom she filed for divorce on the grounds of torture.

Kumvar and Sugra's stories are not unique in rural and urban India. In my research, I ask: How can women, who are structurally oppressed through both religious and cultural norms favoring men, break free of abuse? Women's lives are controlled by informal rules of conduct that restrict their access to education, employment, and human rights—those things most important in creating opportunities for independence. Failure to adhere to such codes of conduct comes with high social costs for these women and their children, including social ostracism and excommunication. Women who live in abusive relationships are particularly vulnerable, and it is very hard to imagine what intervention would look like in such dire conditions.

In Sugra's example, the local Muslim body, which oversees wellbeing of community members under the guidance of religious laws, struck a deal through her lawyer to negotiate terms of the divorce. The deal was: if Sugra dropped the torture case against her husband, then she would be granted the divorce along with one thousand rupees (\$18 U.S.) each month to support her and her children. Sugra signed the papers without understanding the deal allowed her abuser to get away. The financial agreement was also never fulfilled, leaving Sugra unable to support her children. Sugra and her children had to come back to live with her father and his family.

Sugra's case reflects the plight of abused women in weak democracies, where, while there are laws in place to combat violence against women, the lack of implementation of such laws only continues this violence. So, while Sugra had approached the local governing body and the legal system to seek justice, the patriarchal nature of the state meant it failed to provide her justice.

A big problem is that women are not often aware of their rights or the social and economic resources they might have access to in the community. This is a problem of corruption at the

local government corruption, where nepotism and bribery prevents the implementation of policies that are in place to protect women's rights and improve gender equality. For example, most women are unaware that domestic violence is a crime that is punishable by law; and they have almost no information on the existence of shelters and women's organizations that work against the practice. Domestic violence is socially normalized. Reflecting back on the daily abuse that she witnessed within her own family and community, Kumvar explained how the control of women took place: "The men said it was okay to hit us; whether we get hurt or die it does not concern anyone else. We are their wives."



Navi Ben, an AWAG leader, with her husband. Photo credit: author.

In her 2014 book, *Credit to Capabilities: A Sociological Study of Microcredit Groups in India*, sociologist Paromita Sanyal argues that women's agency is crucial to ending patriarchal privilege. Particular to the context of developing communities, she finds that grassroots economic empowerment programs such as microcredit loans have enormous social impacts on women's autonomy within both their communities and households. Women who participate in microcredit groups, she found, experience less restrictions on mobility and have greater freedom to make financial decisions affecting household welfare. Most importantly, Sanyal found these women can collectively negotiate for better public goods, like repairing roads, and are better able

to protect other women in their communities by intervening in domestic violence disputes, for example.

Today a wide variety of empowerment programs exist, including microloan programs but also more political programs focused on educating women in leadership-building and collective bargaining, and in women rights, and programs focused on organizing trade unions for semi-skilled, self-employed women workers. The bulk impact of these programs, run by are non-governmental organizations, whose influence, Sanyal shows, goes far beyond their intended impact, as Sanyal's research suggests.

From 2018-2019, I am following participants in two such programs in the state of Gujarat that focus on, among other things, developing leadership qualities for community women. The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a trade union that support women who operate in the informal economy of home-based businesses, such as kite and incense stick production, selling vegetables or fruit in pushcarts, and picking up garbage. These women have no representation in formal trade unions. And the state does not recognize them as workers, so they don't carry employment licenses or government issued identity cards important in protecting their right to sell goods. A small group of SEWA women are trained as leaders. They recruit self-employed women in the community for trade union membership, bargain collectively for employment rights with the government, and fight against police who regularly harass them.



A SEWA vegetable vendor[Caption]. Photo credit: author.

Ahmedabad Women's Action Group (AWAG), an organization whose sole goal is to empower women against domestic violence, runs the second program I follow in my research. AWAG trains select women to become community leaders against domestic violence; and through, through their access to organizations, shelters, and police stations, these leaders intervene in

domestic violence cases. To explore how these women become empowered through program participation, resist cultural norms that perpetuate women's severe oppression, and empower survivors, let me go back to Kumvar and Sugra's cases.

AWAG ran an empowerment program for women in Sugra's village some years ago. Men in the village discouraged women from attending the workshop, telling them the programs were bait to lure them into prostitution. Many women in the village ended up not attending in part because they feared potential repercussions from the men if they disobeyed. Sugra, who was divorced and living with her parents at the time, nonetheless attended the program meetings out of curiosity and the monetary incentive offered for program attendees. As part of the program, participants took a field trip to the local police stations and courthouse. And for Sugra, who had never been inside either, the trip was an eye opener. She explained: "I realized that this NGO can help us if they are taking us to police stations and making contacts. We had never visited a police station, spoken to police, or seen the inside of the court. Our cases were in the courts but I never went inside one. AWAG took us to these places, and we interacted with the 'powerful' people."

Encouraged by the experience, Sugra enrolled in the leadership training program run by AWAG, and became an AWAG leader. With the help of the organization and their lawyers, the court reopened Sugra's maintenance case; and after a few years, she received a small portion of the money her husband owed her. The charges of torture against her husband and in-laws, however, never came to fruition. But seeing how women can achieve *some* justice through her own experience, Sugra started to help other women. She notes: "After becoming a leader, I am not afraid to go to the police station, to go before the magistrate in the court. If I have to speak up in front of them, I speak up. I am not afraid. The magistrate asked me 'How long did you attend school?' I replied I have never attended school. He did not believe me. He thought I was lying, because of my fearless attitude."

As a leader in her community, Sugra came across Kumvar's case. She helped Kumar file formal cases against the husband at the local police station. She also filed cases against her husband's family, and her brother, who tried to sell her daughters. Sugra arranged to meet Kumvar's in-laws to negotiate an amiable divorce with the help of other leaders in the village. However the talks never materialized, as Sugra found out that the family was planning to kill her and Kumvar at the meeting place.

Kumvar has yet to recover maintenance from her husband, despite having a court order in her favor. But in spite of having limited success with her case, her interactions with Sugra has given her a renewed sense of purpose in life. After all, with Sugra's support, she found the strength to register the court cases and realized domestic violence is a crime—things Kumvar would not have accomplished without Sugra's help. She feels empowered to fight for her and her daughters' rights to live independently; and today, Kumvar sends her daughters to school and does not want them to marry as minors.



AWAG Leaders. Photo credit: author.

On the surface, Sugra's, and especially Kumvar's, lives may not seem to have improved much. They continue to struggle to make ends meet, experience social ostracism attached to single women in their communities, and manage regular threats of violence from their husband's families. But despite these challenges, both women now understand that they have rights. They venture independently into police stations, court houses, and local governing bodies—spaces that are typically male dominated, with the support of networks offered by programs like AWAG and SEWA . They know what questions to ask and who to go to for help.

In these communities, where women do not have a voice or any decision-making power, the awareness of rights and legal resources, and their ability to mobilize new knowledge to register formal complaints against their abusers, is not small feat. This is one of the many ways women's empowerment organizations have made a particularly important contribution in states like India, where cultural norms are often so powerful that legal reforms cannot change the patriarchal code of life. Through collective action, these programs tap ordinary women such as Sugra and Kumvar, providing them with the tools to push cultural boundaries, support women's rights in daily life, and create changes against patriarchal privilege that legitimizes horrific abuse against women and their daughters.