

Community Action in COVID times: Voices of urban slum girls in Vadodara, Gujarat

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Introduction to SAHAJ's COVID Response

SAHAJ has been working in the state of Gujarat in western India for over three decades. The first twenty years of SAHAJ's life were focussed solely on responding to issues of the urban poor in the areas of health, education and rights to shelter and civic amenities. Based on the lessons learnt through the 15 years of urban engagement, SAHAJ has been collaborating with partners in five districts of Gujarat on programmes related to adolescents' development and rights.

SAHAJ's strategy has been to nurture local leadership in the communities where we work. We build capacities of local organisations, like 'Mothers' Committees' to monitor the anganwadi (child care) centres, Basti Development Committees (local area development committees who address problems related to evictions, demolitions, water, sanitation and so on), Young Peoples' Clubs who work on adolescents' and young people's issues, and so on.

As a response to the COVID 19 emergency, SAHAJ team along with its partners in the districts, and local community based organisations, have undertaken several actions. A number of small studies have been done using mobile phones and digital survey platforms. One study was to find out whether the eligible families received the food rations as announced by the government. Another one to find out what happened to women who needed maternal health and safe delivery services in the lockdown period. Yet another study was to find out what issues adolescent girls and boys were facing during the lockdown period. Based on the findings emerging from each of these studies, further action was planned. For example, a campaign on the importance of ration cards and entitlements has been initiated based on the Food Rations Study.

In this case study we have documented the efforts of young people, as they address issues that emerged in the COVID 19 context.

The Context

Vadodara is one of the three most populous cities with a population of 2.1 million according to the 2011 Census, and is located in Central Gujarat. It is one of the eight Municipal Corporations in Gujarat. The city is divided into 28 wards. It has 336 slum pockets that make up more than 20 % population of the city. Some of the slums have piped water supply. They lack proper drainage, internal roads, sanitation. Sewage generated is discharged out into the open lowland or into nearby natural drains. There is waterlogging during heavy rains.

SAHAJ works in 15 slums (eight in Ward 06 and seven Ward 11). Most people here are daily wage earners. Main occupations of people are: construction workers, painters, carpenters, working on/or running tea or snack stalls, vegetable vendors, selling trinkets, small provision stalls. Women largely work as domestic help, office cleaners, cooks, caregivers. Some slightly educated ones work as office assistants, receptionists, sales persons, delivery persons, in malls, in companies as contractual labour. The really poor groups are engaged in begging and rag picking.

These slums have their share of migrants, both from within Gujarat (mainly from the deprived tribal districts) as well as from other poorer states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar.

The State's COVID Response

On March 15 2020, following the events in other states, the Government of Gujarat announced the closure of schools, colleges, educational institutes, malls, multiplexes, and swimming pools across the state till March 29 as a precaution against COVID 19. The first two cases of the COVID 19 in the state were confirmed on March 19. After the third COVID 19 death in the state on March 26, the Government announced free food doorstep facility for elderly persons staying alone at home during lockdown. And the next day, a mobile app was launched to track home-quarantined persons.

Gujarat is a highly industrialised state where millions of migrant workers seek their livelihood. Early in the lockdown period, the Government also announced that it would provide food and accommodation to migrant workers while restricting their travel during the 21-day lockdown period. Next week a Rs.650 crore package was announced for 65 lakh families of the poor, labourers, unorganised workers, construction workers of the state. The Government of Gujarat also warned factories, businesses and employers that FIRs will be filed under the Disaster Management Act against those who would laid off workers or cut their salaries during the lockdown period.

By the first week of April, 31 private hospitals across the state were insourced and designated as COVID-19 hospitals, doubling the bed strength. Gujarat's testing was amongst the lowest in the country in the initial weeks. And although it was ramped up, it continued to be lower than required. Gujarat Government pressed upon the industry lobby to increase the production of PPEs and ventilators.

In April the Chief Minister also announced that the National Food Security Act card-holding families would get Rs. 1000 cash assistance for the month. Despite all of these relief measures, people suffered acute hardships. Migrants were thrown out of their rented rooms because they could not pay their landlords. Many families had no food to eat during the lockdown period because they subsisted on daily wages and could not go to work.

This is the context in which SAHAJ and the community groups and leaders that it works with responded to various issues that emerged in the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic in Vadodara.

Community Action by SAHAJ's Adolescent Peer Leaders

In this section, we describe a few initiatives taken by local community groups and the adolescent Peer Leaders identified and nurtured by SAHAJ over the years. These initiatives are illustrative of the range of actions that have been undertaken by local leaders.

Adolescent Girls' Group makes Masks

Mali Mohallah (Gardeners' Colony) is a *basti* of 180 households. SAHAJ has been working here since 2017. The 'malis' deal with flowers – they buy and sell flowers and convert them into garlands that are used for worship. They sell these flowers and garlands on street corners. It is a very precarious existence. This community is very orthodox and its rigidity affects girls and women greatly especially their education and reproductive health. Majority of the adolescent girls dropout of school as soon as they attain puberty. Early marriages and early pregnancies are very common. SAHAJ team members decided to engage with this *basti*, seeing their vulnerability and the situation of the girls and women.

The efforts of our Community Organiser brought together a group of ten girls willing to learn skills that would help them in becoming self-reliant. As stated by one of the girls in Mali Mohalla

“Kalpana Didi (SAHAJ Community Organiser) put it so simply when I doubted my own potential of making the products. She said, beta I am only going to teach you more skills with the needle and thread that you are already familiar with. You weave garlands, now you will weave necklaces. You will use the needle and thread on cloth and see what wonderful things it makes. She was so right. I am actually playing more skillfully with my needle and thread.” - Deepali Mali

Over a period of two years Kalpana taught them how to cut cloth, add a lining to it, stitch it and then pipe it for a good finished look. Some learnt to make jewellery out of beads and threads. Kalpana also managed to get two sewing machines and raw material from a donor. And now the girls have formed their own group that they have named ‘Akanksha’ (meaning aspiration). The girls have been displaying their products in exhibitions across the city. The response in the first exhibition in the University encouraged them immensely. They have also been getting orders for the products.



A girls' group formed in Mali Mahallah
Photo credit: Kalpana Mahadik (September 2019)

Kalpana taught two group members to source and purchase material. Three girls are now able to do costing calculations. One of them is the bank account holder where the income obtained through the sale is deposited. The girls then distribute the amount according to their labour costs. Although girls in this community are not permitted to use mobile phones, Kalpana taught them how to search for designs on smart phones. Two of them have access to their brother's or father's smart phone. With permission from their fathers or brothers, they started using them to find out designs for bags, purses, files and folders, and other cloth products.

The COVID 19 pandemic and the lockdown affected these girls in many ways. Their families suffered because they lost their business. Flowers were neither available because of supply chain issues, nor were there any buyers. The families' incomes were drastically reduced.

Meanwhile SAHAJ had initiated some COVID response work in the *bastis* where they were involved as well as in the partners' field areas, across five districts. In addition to monitoring government's food distribution efforts, and arranging for additional food ration for families who were slipping through the cracks, SAHAJ decided to give safety kits to all its frontline workers and volunteers (Peer Leaders and community leaders). The kit included a sanitizer, hand towel, five masks and three pairs of hand gloves. With the rising demand for masks, the masks available in the market were in short supply. And they were expensive. Kalpana and the Akanksha girls decided to supply the masks for SAHAJ's requirement.

Kalpana says

.... But it was difficult to get the material during the lockdown. It was not possible to take the girls to the market in the COVID 19 situation so I and Rekha Didi, our Field Coordinator went

out to purchase the material. We had to go five times as the stockist also had problems procuring enough material of the quality we wanted.

Due to our tight timeline, we outsourced the work to three girls/ women from other bastis but they could not manage the work within the deadline – they were married and already burdened with child care. The lockdown had doubled their work. They could provide only 422 masks in six days. In the same period, six girls from Mali Mohallah, who took the responsibility, completed the first lot of 3000 masks which were immediately dispatched to the four districts.



Girl came together for good cause

Picture credit: Kalpana Mahadik (May 2020)



A girl from Mali Mahollah was making masks on urgent basis

Picture credit: Kalpana Mahadik (June 2020)

These girls managed their other household responsibilities by waking up early. They took turns on the four sewing machines that they had amongst them - two sewing machines belong to the group and two girls have their own sewing machines. Some of them worked till late at night. The second batch of 2328 masks were stitched within the next three days. These were given to the SAHAJ frontline workers and peer leaders in urban Vadodara.

The girls managed to earn between Rs 1000 to Rs 8250. Their parents were happy because it was the only income for many of them in the lockdown period. But the girls decided to make a 'Kitty' which would sustain their work. They decided to take only half the amount due to them as their labour charges. They put 50 % of the amount in the kitty to augment their working capital.



Girls from Mali Mahollah was making masks on urgent basis

Picture credit: Kalpana Mahadik (May 2020)

Voices of the girls

"I am happy that masks made by us will be used by people who are risking their lives for the safety of others. We in turn are ensuring their safety" - Komal Mali

"I am proud that I could support my family during the time of crisis. We could buy basic necessities for our survival" - Lata Chauhan

"I was so angry because I could not stitch the masks for three days as I was in my periods. We are not allowed to do work that contributes to earning or is a source of income. We have to sit outside our homes and are not even allowed to use bathrooms for cleaning ourselves. We have

to use the toilets instead for these four days. We are not allowed to weave garlands during our periods.” Sakshi (name changed)



Handling Menstruation during the Lockdown

The COVID 19 pandemic has created a havoc for all sections of the society. The lockdown period of two months was most challenging for majority of the people. The women and the girls suffered the most on all fronts, in terms of increased burden of household responsibilities and looking after children, physical and mental abuse, and limited access to health services and products due to restricted mobility in this period. The men in the family did the jobs that needed going out. This included buying groceries, vegetables and other necessities for the family. Many women and girls could not go to the medical stores when they were menstruating. The women felt very embarrassed to ask the male members to get sanitary pads for them. So many of them opted to use cloth instead of pads. But using old used cotton cloth in the house was also not so easy. Changing the pads, washing and drying them in their small houses when all the members of the family were in the house for 24 hours of the day was quite a problem for these women/ girls. With a break in the income, some families did not even get two square meals a day, buying pads was out of question for them in such circumstances. The summer heat made it worse for women who were menstruating and many of them reported rash and itching around their vagina during and after their menses.

‘I felt shy to ask my mama (maternal uncle) to bring pads for me. I told my mami (uncle’s wife. She has no mother) and she put it in the list of things my mama was to bring that day. When he brought the things she came to the kitchen and gave me the packet wrapped in paper’.
Jalpa

The girl members of the Yuva Working Group (the executive body of a young people’s federation nurtured by SAHAJ) discussed this issue when they came together for reporting of distribution of relief kits to vulnerable families in their *bastis*. Some were of the opinion that SAHAJ should keep sanitary pads with the Peer Leaders in each *basti* so that the girls can purchase them in such times of emergency. Since livelihoods have been affected



so badly, the girls considered taking up the offer of an entrepreneur who engages local women to make and pack sanitary pads, and baby and adult diapers. Marketing the products, they felt, would help girls to earn incentives. They planned a second meeting to work out the logistics on purchase, production, storage and sale of products.

Meanwhile SAHAJ had received 500 packets of sanitary pads (seven pieces /pack) as a donation from the Municipal Commissioner of Vadodara for distribution to the girls in *bastis* where SAHAJ works. This was shared with the Yuva Working Group and they were asked who should be given these sanitary pads. The discussion brought out interesting points. Free distribution to girls and women in select households is extremely challenging - like, how does one convince people who have not received the benefits on why they have not received them? How do we avoid unnecessary arguments with the community? The importance of having strong support at the *basti* level etc.



'Distribution of things for free for a limited population is very challenging. We need to justify the purpose of choosing 'a few' from the 'so many'. We live in the same bastis and it becomes more difficult for us as well as our parents to face people who are trouble makers'. - Anjali Suryavanshi

While two girls were of the opinion that the sanitary pads should be given to the women construction workers, one of them said they should be given to women living on the streets. Other girls had a different perspective and they argued that free distribution does not mean giving pads to women just because they live on streets or work long hours. The utilization is important. They should be given to girls and women who are using sanitary pads or would want to use them, and not to women /girls who use cloth during menses.

'All girls do not use sanitary pads in our bastis. Some use cloth. It is no use giving them the pads unless they want to try using them. Otherwise it will be similar to the iron tablets or food packets given from the anganwadi to girls and pregnant women and they throwing it away. Free things are not valued'. Deepika Chauhan

Finally, it was decided that girls in the age group of 12 to 14 years will be educated on 'Menstruation' and the girls who have started menstruating in the last three months will be given one packet each. The girls who are first time users will be demonstrated the appropriate use the pads and the disposal. The girl peer leaders from each *basti* would conduct this session in their *basti* following the COVID 19 safety protocols drawn up by SAHAJ.

'School going girls get the pads from the vending machines in their schools. They have to put in Rs. 5 and they get one pad. Pads are available in Sulabh Sauchalya also (Public Toilets under the Swaccha Bharat Abhiyan- Clean India Campaign). Such machines should be put in Peer Leaders homes in the bastis, to avoid arguments about why she taking the money'. Shruti

My Experience of Relief Work during the Lockdown

I am Shruti Panchal, living in Gokulnagar. I am studying in Second Year of the B.Sc. programme in M.S. University. I am 19 years old and have been associated with SAHAJ since the last two years.

The lockdown of two months due to COVID 19 has been very challenging for everyone. Majority of the people in my *basti* are daily wagers. With no means of livelihood, many families had to manage with just one meal a day. Some donors distributed cooked meals in the first week of the lockdown. The ration distributed by the government was not enough to feed families during the entire lockdown period. Even during this period of crisis, corruption affected the flow of rations to the people. Also, families and individuals without ration cards were asked to wait till every card holder had finished receiving their ration and so some of them ended getting nothing from the Public Distribution System (PDS) depots.

I was engaged in the distribution of relief material and rations to the neediest families/individuals from my *basti*. I learnt a lot from this experience.

I, along with Prem, Manisha and Ajay (other Peer Leaders from Gokulnagar) made a list of the vulnerable families in our *basti* during the lockdown period. We sent the list to Alpa Didi and Jitu Sir (SAHAJ field staff). They added a few names of the vulnerable families whom they knew. As soon as the lockdown was declared, Alpa didi, Shilpa didi, Jitu sir and Jignesh Sir came to our *basti* and shared the format to be filled of each family on our lists. We were oriented on the safety protocols that we need to follow while visiting each family. Like maintaining physical distance from each other and the respondent, wearing gloves if we need to touch any document shown to us for verification, wearing masks at all times while doing the survey or working in groups, carrying our own water bottles etc. We were given a safety kit which had a hand towel, sanitizer, three pairs of gloves and five masks.

We filled in the information in the given format. This tool had questions on their vulnerability, documents they possess for getting benefits under the relief schemes of the government and relief they have already received during the lockdown period. We submitted 148 forms.

As we finished our survey, Alpa Didi and Jitu called us to inform us that one person whose home we had visited was taken to the hospital as she was suspected to be Corona positive. They told us not to be scared, but go for 'Home quarantine', inform them immediately if we see any signs of the infection. They also told us to follow some safety precautions while we stayed with our family and gave us the list of immunity boosters that we could take to increase our immunity. They called us every day to ask about our health. They themselves were in home quarantine. We were all really tense the next three days. We were scared but we had no signs of the infection.

Then we learnt that the person suspected with Corona, had indeed tested positive. She was a 60 plus woman with high blood pressure. The Municipal Corporation workers came around, with police and put up a notice on the door where the family lived – 'This family is under quarantine'. The family members were asked to watch out for signs of infection. Her daughter who had just delivered a baby was also quarantined in her mother's house along with the baby.

Surprisingly, the Corporation workers did not bother to find out who else was in contact with the infected person in the previous few days. We wondered what would be happening to so many people who were in contact with infected persons but are not followed up by the government. Does

'Lockdown' mean admitting the 'suspected Corona people' in hospitals and no responsibility at all towards other contacts? The 60 year old woman was admitted in the Corona care ward directly, even before she got her reports. She was vulnerable to infection because of her age and other health problems.

After we came out of quarantine, we were informed that the ration kits for our *basti* were ready. We unloaded the kits in the tuition teacher's house because we did not dare take them into the *basti*. Our *basti* comprises of 945 households and we had kits for only 148 families. We decided to call the persons on the list one by one to Yogesh Sir's house. We had their contact numbers. We asked them to wear masks or cover their mouth and nose with a handkerchief /dupatta when they came to collect their kits. We sanitized their hands before handing them the kits. We delivered kits to the homes of people who were not in a position to come and collect the kit due to their age or disability.

People thanked us while receiving the kit. It made us feel very happy.

I like to help people. But SAHAJ showed me the right way to help the right people. Being a science student, I was preoccupied with my school and tuitions. My association with SAHAJ in the initial year was limited to attending various group discussions and training sessions. I started engaging with these kinds of activities only since the last year. I was aware that many families in my *basti* are poor but this survey showed me the other vulnerabilities that affect people. I am also from a poor family comprising of six members with only my father as a breadwinner. He is a delivery man with Zomato. His salary stopped for the two months of the lockdown. It was quite difficult to manage. We had to go to the ration shop three times and had to stand in long queues. We received the ration only once during the lockdown period. I was pleasantly surprised when I also received the ration kit from SAHAJ donors.



Peer leaders were happy when most needy families received a ration kit
Photo credits: Alpana Nayi and Jignesh Jadav
(May 2020)



Addressing vulnerabilities – Peer Leaders extend themselves

While identifying the vulnerable families in Gokulnagar, the Peer Leaders came across a family of two people - Jagdish Champaklal Makwana, a 30 year old man who stays with his 55 year old widowed mother. Jagdish lost his father when he was just five years old and his mother brought him up single handedly. He studied only till Class 4 and dropped out of school to help his mother by doing small odd jobs. He is working in Jagdish Farsan outlet near the City Bus Depot at present. His work comprises of

ferrying stocks from the godown to the shop, and cleaning the shop. He works for 12 hours a day and gets a paltry salary of Rs 5000 per month. His mother has health problems and he is the only earning member. They live in a rented house for which they pay a monthly rent of Rs 2500 plus the electricity charges. During the lockdown he received just 50 % of his salary. They had to manage within this.

The Peer Leaders shortlisted his name for the ration relief kit. He was very happy to receive this help. The Peer Leaders Prem and Aayush and the Field Officer Jitendra became quite friendly with him. They learnt that he had to spend Rs 20 for commuting to his work place each day. Sometimes he would hitch a lift with someone. With the limited income, almost half of which was spent on rent and electricity it is difficult for the mother and son to survive. They shared this issue with the SAHAJ team. When asked what could be done to support him, one of the Peer Leaders suggested that he should be given conveyance or rent for some months till he gets his full salary. Explaining that was a temporary solution, they were asked to find out the possibilities of Jagdish cycling the 7 kilometers to his work place.

The boys talked to Jagdish, who appreciated this suggestion. The boys were then asked to find out the cost of a suitable cycle from one or two stores. They were accompanied by Jitendra, a SAHAJ team member. SAHAJ team members then sought a donor from their list of well-wishers. A brand-new cycle was bought for Rs 4400. The boys were as excited as Jagdish. Jagdish was invited to the SAHAJ office and handed his new cycle.

When Jitendra visited him two days later, he saw the cycle parked in his house, while Jagdish was away at work. When asked why he was not using it, he said since it was raining he did not want to make it dirty! Next week when they went to see his mother, she happily told them that Jagdish had started using the cycle.

'I went to buy something for somebody for the first time. At first the shop owner started showing us racer cycles. But when I and Jitu Sir told the shop owner the purpose of buying the cycle, he showed us a sturdy cycle. He readily gave us a discount of Rs 500. And he also asked for SAHAJ's card. He said in such distressing times this is really a very nice gesture'

Enabling Factors, Challenges and Insights

The case studies above show the nature of local issues affecting different population groups and demonstrate that cookie-cutter solutions of the State COVID response usually do not work. These solutions end up being considerably diluted and / or distorted in implementation. Solutions have to be adapted to local contexts. And for this, collectives and local organisations provide the necessary platform for discussions and brainstorming for alternatives. Collectives also provide members the necessary support to manage the challenges and risks involved in efforts for the pandemic containment and mitigation. When no external agencies could reach the most vulnerable because of the complete lockdown, it was the local leaders who could organise the relief and education and information dissemination in their neighbourhoods.

Some of the enabling factors for community engagement in the COVID response, apart from the existence of local organisations and collectives, is the history of proven and credible leadership at the local level. Authorities and relief agencies could reach out to them, confident that the relief would reach the most vulnerable households.

Mobile phones and web connectivity enabled the use of social media for information dissemination, for data collection.

The examples above also show the agency of young people as they struggle to overcome the barriers created by restrictive gender norms. And their sense of solidarity, pride as well as gratification as they see their efforts contributing to the well-being of others.

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