



*COVID Experiences of
Youth in Gujarat, India*

VOICES

OF ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH FROM MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

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Mobilizing communities

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INTRODUCTION

COVID showed no discrimination and has affected the lives of all in one way or the other. Health, Education and Livelihood faced a major setback and directly impacted many individuals including young people with or without disabilities. Losing a family member to the pandemic or fear of contracting the virus or facing starvation due to loss of wages or not being able to go home from the migration locations were some of the many situations faced by people during the pandemic. Anxiety and depression, morbidities and increased financial burden were some of the aftermaths.

SAHAJ works directly with marginalized communities in urban Vadodara and through partners in four districts of Gujarat (Anand, Ahmedabad, Dahod and Mahisagar). It was important to address some of the emerging needs of the people which needed an understanding of the situations that people are going through.

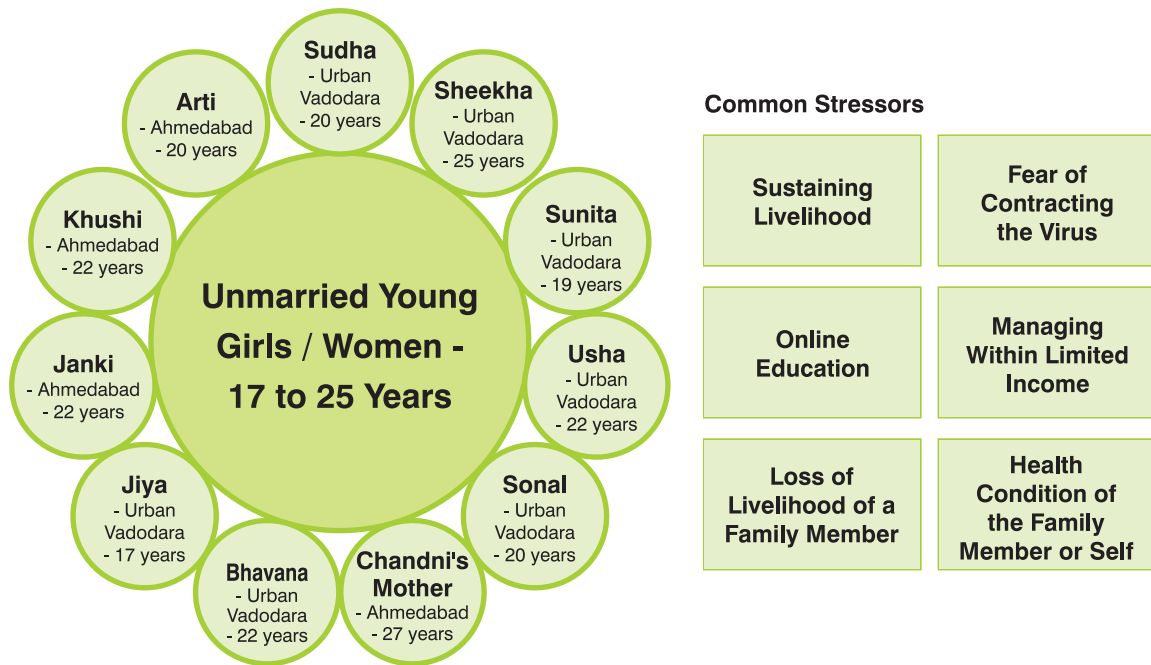
Through individual interactions, we could gather experiences of 13 young women that reflect on problems they faced during and post-pandemic period, their coping mechanisms and important messages that they deliver through these experiences. The experiences of a mother of a young girl with a disability and the husband of a young woman show the stress that the other players went through when these young women were affected.

In this document, respondent's names have changed to protect their identity.

COVID IMPACT ON YOUNG LIVES

SECTION I

EXPERIENCES OF TEN YOUNG UNMARRIED GIRLS/ WOMEN AND A PARENT OF A YOUNG GIRL WITH A DISABILITY



Three of these young girls are girls with disabilities. One more experience at the end of Section I is that of a parent of one young unmarried woman with an intellectual disability who was infected with COVID.



SUDHA

Sudha is a 20-year-old unmarried girl belonging to an indigenous community. She lives with her parents, an elder sister and a younger brother in Vadodara. Her father earned his living by sewing clothes but lost his livelihood due to COVID. Now he works as a construction worker.

Sudha shared that life for her family was quite stressful since the last one and a half years. Her father was in their native village when the COVID lockdown was announced. *“He could not come back for almost two months. We had to manage on our own. This situation was so sudden. We had no savings and had no source of income. The ration kit given by SAHAJ helped us survive for some days”.*



SHEEKHA

Sheekha, is a 25-year-old unmarried girl living with her mother in a basti in urban Vadodara. She lost her father just about six months before this interview. Her mother works as an Anganwadi helper in the anganwadi in her basti. They own the house they are presently living in. Sheekha is working in a private nursing home for children in the administration department for the last six years. She has passed Class 12 but was discouraged by her mother to continue further studies.

Sharing her COVID experience she said, *“It was a tough time. The staff was asked to come on alternate days and we were paid for the days we worked. With salary cuts it was difficult to manage all the expenses”.* Her paternal uncle helped her get ration kit twice from a well-wisher and she also got a ration kit from SAHAJ. Normally she would travel to work in shared auto rickshaws but with COVID, the rickshaws were not running as usual. She asked a colleague to pick her and drop her on her vehicle. Her colleague drives a moped and lives in the same vicinity. The colleague obliged for a few days but then asked Sheekha to manage the commute on her own. Shikha’s mother bought her a cycle and Sheekha would ride this to the hospital. She says, *“I was really stressed during the entire period of COVID. I work in a children’s hospital. I was concerned about them getting infected because of the staff including me, I was also scared of getting infected myself because of the crowd in the hospital and most of all I was worried for my mother. What if any of us got infected - we have no one to rely on. Who would have supported us in such times? My paternal uncle and his family who stay upstairs were all infected with COVID”.*



SUNITA

Sunita is a 19-year-old college-going girl from a tribal community, living in a nuclear family. Her father is a daily wager and her mother is a homemaker. She wants to be an IPS officer one day. She has an elder sister who is married and lives with her marital family. Her brother-in-law is supportive, too. Her family is also very supportive.

Her father's construction work was shut down during the lockdown period, so he was at home for three months. Her mother knows sewing which helped her to earn a little bit from taking orders for making masks. Her father also helped her mother in the stitching work and they survived in a tough period.

They received ration kits two to three times from SAHAJ. Sunita complained, *"We have an *APL ration card and though the government declared that they would supply rations to all, without any categories, we did not receive it even once"*. They went two times to the Public Distribution Shop in their area, but the shop keeper refused to give them their quota, saying that their ration card was old and not renewed.

Sunita feels that there was relatively less struggle for her family during the COVID period as no one in her family got infected by the virus although there were many cases in their basti.

She expressed that her education suffered due to corona because though the university ran online classes, there were lots of disturbances. *"My exam was conducted online and I faced lots of problems. I submitted all my papers however two papers did not go through due to network issues. The university asked me to re-appear in two subjects"*. Finally, she cleared her bachelor degree in commerce only following year.



USHA

Usha is a 22-years-old girl who has completed her graduation in commerce and works in the loan department of a bank. She has been working and supporting her family financially for the past four years. She said that she had to fight with her family to continue her education.

Her lockdown period was not as stressful for her as it was for many others. For three months, the bank where she was working operated online. She was allowed to work from home and she was given full salary, without any cuts. *“Actually I enjoyed the lockdown period by watching web series, hanging out with friends and getting to sleep till late in the morning”*. Her family is financially sound so there was no issue of survival.

*APL ration card was issued by the State Government to households living above the poverty line



SONAL

Sonal is a 20-year-old unmarried girl who lives in a basti of Vadodara. She is originally from Dahod, one of the districts of the tribal belt. Her father had two marriages. As her mother could not conceive after Sonal, her father married her mother's sister. Sonal has six siblings from two mothers - two brothers and four sisters. She failed in Class 12 Commerce and re-appeared for the exam a few times but could not pass so left her education and took a job as a sales girl in a mall.

Sonal and her family went to her native place Dahod, just the day before the lockdown to attend her cousin's marriage. But due to the sudden lockdown, her family was stuck there for three months. All of them had to work on the farm for their survival. When she came back to Baroda after three months, she had lost her job. She joined in another company near Vadodara, where she worked for one and a half year. One day, she had an accident while she was on duty. A radiator plate flew up and hurt her eye. She had to take medical treatment for three months. She is left with a white spot on her retina, which is clearly visible.

After completing her treatment, she re-joined the company. *“The company did not pay me the treatment costs as promised. I submitted all the documents. They did not pay me my salary of fifty-one days”*. She left her job with a huge disappointment.



BHAVANA

Bhavana is a 22-year-old with a B.Com degree living in Mujhmahuda. She has been brought up by her paternal grandparents and uncle since she was nine months old. Her parents separated and then deserted her and live with their own new families. She was married last month (May 2022). She and her husband want to pursue their education and complete their master's in Commerce. Her parents-in-law are quite understanding and opted for a 'mass wedding' so that her paternal uncle did not have to spend much on the wedding celebrations.

Her paternal uncle and aunt had a tough time meeting the household expenses with three girls studying, one, Bhavana and their own two daughters. Her uncle drives an auto rickshaw for a living. *"Auto rickshaws were hardly plying during the covid period. My uncle did not earn much. My aunt supported him by working as domestic help. And then my marriage was fixed. Usually marriages in our community happen in January or February but my uncle requested my in-laws if the marriage could be postponed till May as he was short of money. They agreed. My fiancé showed readiness for a court marriage but my uncle wanted me to get married according to our customs. My in-laws suggested that we get married in the 'mass wedding of our community' and it saved a considerable amount that otherwise my uncle would have to spend for my marriage".*

"College was closed for almost one and a half year and we had to do online studies. It was difficult at first. Then I picked up. Got my certificate for attending online sessions. Now have to appear for the final exams" said Bhavana when she was interviewed a week before her marriage.



JIYA

Jiya is a 17-year-old girl who lives with her mother and two younger brothers in one of the bastis in urban Vadodara for many years. One brother is in Class 10 and the other is in Class 8. They study in the same school that Jiya went to. Jiya has passed Class 10 and wants to study further. But she has to work and has no choice in the current scenario. She misses her father, who died last year, due to high diabetes and jaundice.

With COVID lockdown, when her father was still alive but had no work, the situation was bad. They had spent all their life savings and assets on their mother's treatment who was paralysed after she met with an accident. *"We literally starved. SAHAJ gave us a ration kit but we did not have cooking gas to cook food, so we decided to cook on the chullah (stove). But we did not have money even to buy the wood, so we broke the wooden door in our balcony and used the wood for cooking food"*. She talks of the bitter experience they have had with their relatives. *"None of our relatives who flocked around my parents when we were well off, showed their faces after my mother's accident, nor when my father was ill or after his death. We were fighting the battle on our own"*.

The lockdown and the period that followed were very stressful for the family. *"My father joined his work again after the lockdown but had to stay in the company as he could not afford the transport. He came home once a week. He had diabetes, and he had to take medicine by injection (insulin) but he did not spend on his medicines. He sent everything to us. He stayed where he worked. His sugar levels became high and he had jaundice. But he was scared to ask for leave thinking he would lose his job. When he fell critically ill, the manager informed us. We brought him back to Vadodara. But he did not go to the hospital because he was scared that they will admit him. It was the second wave of COVID and he did not want to be in the hospital. Now I had two people to nurse, one my father and the other my mother. My younger brother is quite understanding and helped me in whatever he could. But our father did not survive and died in November 2020"*.

When asked about her aspirations, she was quite emotional. She said, *"I was my father's favourite. I was allowed to concentrate on my school and my tuitions. I had a carefree life. I was allowed to go out with my friends. He wanted me to study till Class 12 and then go for nursing. But with his death, everything is scattered. It will take longer to bring back everything together. I want to study even now, but will have to be patient"*. She values education and knows that good qualifications give better career opportunities. *"If the government would provide free higher education to girls, there would be so many girls like me who could take the opportunity to complete their education. Parents would have to only pay the tuition fees"*. She would continue with a part-time job while she studies. But this she says would have to be deferred by another year or two. She wants her younger brother to complete his education and get a good job.



JANKI

Janki is 23-years-old, a polio survivor and has an orthopaedic disability as a result of polio. Her right arm and leg are weak. She is unable to do much work with her right arm and walks on the balls of her right toes, with her heel stretched up. Her disability certificate shows her to have 60% disability.

Janki lives in a lower middle-class area with her parents and an older brother. Her father works in a factory and her mother is a homemaker. Her brother has completed his education and works as a teacher in a private school as well as in a tuition class. Janki's education was discontinued after Class 12.

COVID 19 lockdown was difficult for the family. The usually sufficient income earned by her father and brother dried up. *"We have an APL ration card but did not get any groceries. My father was at home and we did not have ration at home. Neetaben* provided groceries which were of help".* However, Janki says, *"I did not suffer at all during the lockdown. I did not even have to work at home because my mother would not let me do anything."*



KHUSHI

22-years-old Khushi lives in a slum-like area of Ahmedabad with her parents and three siblings. She has an older brother, a younger sister and a younger brother. All siblings except the older brother have a college education – Khushi has completed BA. Khushi has a locomotor disability. She was born with a hunch/deformity of the spine which affected her gait. According to Khushi, when she was a child, her arms were twisted and thin. Khushi has a disability certificate which states her disability to be 40%.

Lockdown was hard for the family. Her father and older brother lost employment and income. There was nothing at home to eat. The family had to rely on food distributed as a part of relief efforts for about six months. Even after the lockdown ended, her father and brother did not find regular employment. Household burden too increased during lockdown which Khushi, her mother and sister managed. But she adds that her brother helped with chores as well. Education became online and it was a challenge for Khushi. *“In the small house finding space where others would not interrupt was a challenge. We had network issues as well. So I told my teacher that I could not manage online classes. After college, our teachers told us we could attend lectures at our own risk. I was happy to attend. I was always careful and took precautions to prevent catching infection”.*

On probing though Khushi admits that COVID pandemic did affect her life. *“Had it been a normal year, I would have received my graduation certificate on time and could have already found a job. Now I have to wait”.*

**Ms. Neeta Panchal now a paraplegic was paralyzed waist down in an accident during the 2001, Gujarat earthquake when she was just 17 years. She is associated (secretary) with the Disability Advocacy Group, a group of people with all types of disabilities across all age groups across Gujarat. She is associated with SAHAJ as a project partner for the last four years.*



ARTI

Arti is a 20-years-old resident of Ahmedabad. She is presently unmarried and lives in a one-bedroom-hall-kitchen apartment with her parents. Her 54-years-old father works in a diamond polishing unit and her mother, who is 47 years old, is a homemaker. Arti has a visual disability. She has no vision in her right eye and very low vision in her left eye. Her disability certificate describes it as 60% vision loss.

Arti was studying in the second year (which comprises of third and fourth semesters) of her degree course when colleges closed due to the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic and classes were offered online. Online studies and prolonged exposure to computer screens put a strain on her already weak vision and worsened her eyesight. She secured first class in the third semester and distinction in the fourth semester. Arti triumphantly says, *“I did not compromise on my studies. And I am proud of my achievement”.*

Arti's positive attitude towards life is reflected in her observation of her experience of the COVID 19 pandemic. She says, *"It was "50 % good and 50% bad. It was good because I could spend time with my sister during the first lockdown and later on with my parents".* She feels that her bond with her parents has strengthened after the lockdowns when they spent time together at home talking, sharing meals and upholding each other's spirits. It was also good because her brother-in-law was the only person who caught the infection which was mild and he recovered quickly at home. *"The bad part was loss of three months income for my father".* But she follows it up by acknowledging the help she and her family received from Neetaben.



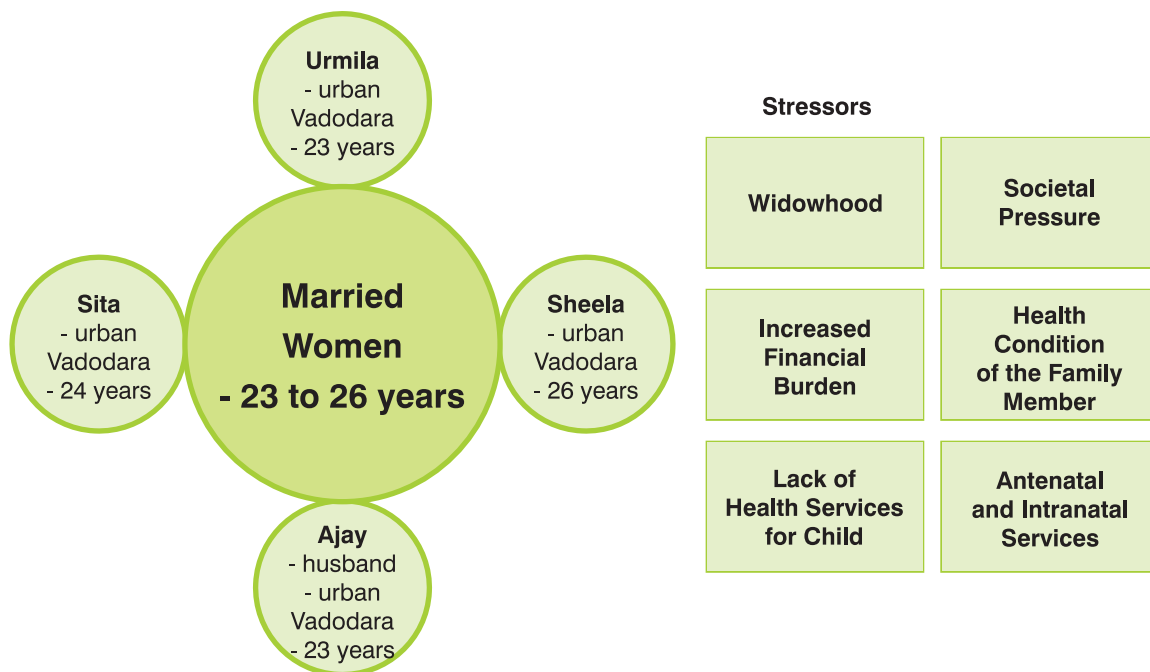
CHANDANI'S MOTHER

Meenaben is Chandani's mother. Chandani is 27 years old and has an intellectual disability. Meenaben is 55 years old and lives in a small apartment in a low-income area on the periphery of Ahmedabad with her 60-years-old husband Nareshbhai, 24-years-old son Tejas and Chandani. According to Meenaben, Chandani's disability certificate shows 65% disability.

The recent COVID 19 pandemic was hard on the family. *"All members of the family except Tejas contracted COVID 19. Chandani's condition was worse. Doctor advised us to admit Chandni to Civil hospital. But I was worried that Chandani would not be able to cope with isolation and being alone in an unfamiliar place. So we chose to get her admitted to a private hospital. I was still recovering from Corona 19 at the time and took care of Chandani also. I stayed with her in the hospital for seven days. And looked after her at home for three months after she was discharged from the hospital. I am so relieved that my daughter has recovered from the illness".* The family spent about Rs. 1.5 lakh on treatment of all family members. Of this, Rs. 75,000/- was for Chandani's treatment at the private hospital.

Section II

Contains the experiences of three young ever-married women from urban Vadodara





URMILA

Urmila is a young 23-years-old tribal widow currently staying in Tarsali, Vadodara with her family. She is originally from the Panchmahal district but was brought up in a basti of Vadodara which is her maternal home. She has two sisters and one brother. Her elder sister is married and her younger siblings are working. Her father works as a contractor on a construction site.

She shared how her life is completely changed after COVID. Her's was a love marriage. Both she and her husband worked as construction workers. During the lockdown, she went to her husband's native place with her husband and father-in-law. She lived there with her extended family where she was forced to do all household chores. She was frustrated and was waiting to back to Vadodara.

When they came back, her husband committed suicide at the construction site where they were working. According to her it was due to family disputes between her husband and her parents-in-law. As she was not a choice of her parents-in-law, they blamed her for their son's death. *"They demanded everything that I had received during marriage and kept the things that my parents had given me in marriage. I gave them everything, did not even keep the petticoat that they had given me. What was I to do with these things when my most prized possession was lost forever"*.

She is quite disturbed and with her family's support has started working part time. *"My parents have faced a lot due to my marriage. They were cast out of our community because I had married a person of my choice. Still they tried to support me. My mother stood by me all the time even though my father sometimes gets upset which changes his attitude towards me.....My parents want me to marry again and settle down in life. I too am aware that I am young and I will need someone. Now I will marry based on their choice. I do not want them to be unhappy because of me"* says Urmila.



SHEELA

Sheela is a 26-year-old married woman belonging to an indigenous community from Devgadhi Bariya. She has studied up to Class 12 and stays in a joint family in Vadodara. She belongs to a well-off family. Her husband and father-in-law, both work on construction sites.

She shared that COVID lockdown was not so challenging for her family in terms of finances but they got stuck in their native village Devgadhi Bariya for three months. The shops were closed and there were restrictions on mobility. They have a ration card but they have not updated it for a long time. She says they do not need to use it as they are financially sound. *“But my son who was just two months old and missed his vaccination for that period as the anganwadis were closed. When I came back to Vadodara, I talked to the Didi (Field Officer - SAHAJ) who took me to the anganwadi worker of my basti. My child received all the vaccines”.*



SITA

Sita is a young married woman of 24 years living in a joint family in a basti (Vadodara). She belongs to a tribal community and hails from a small village in the Dahod district. She has passed Class 12 and could not continue further education due to a financial crisis in her maternal home. Being the eldest of four children, she feels very responsible.

Sita was pregnant for the third time lockdown. Her family were stuck in their native place for five months where they had gone for ‘Holi’ celebration just before the announcement of lockdown. She lived with the extended family and meeting their basic needs was the main concern for her family. They borrowed Rs. 50,000 - to 60,000 from relatives which they still have to repay.

“My pregnancy was due at that time. I delivered my baby boy in the trust hospital, near our village. It cost us Rs. 6000. We borrowed from my husband’s friend”.



AJAY

Ajay is a 24-year-old youth living in Mujhmahuda - Vadodara. His family first lived in the Chhani area and they shifted to here in the last 15 years. Ajay is currently married and lives with his family. His family is quite large comprising of his parents, his two siblings and their families. Ajay's father, Ramanlal has two wives. They are real sisters. When the elder sister could not conceive after some years of marriage, so Ajay's father was married off to her younger sister Vilas. Ramanlal and Vilas have three sons, one of them is Ajay. Ajay is an active youth leader in his basti. He is associated with SAHAJ since he was an adolescent.

During COVID, it was difficult time for him and his family. He lost his job due to COVID and opted for daily wage labour to support his family.

Ajay says his wife's health was a big stressor for him. Kailas, his wife has a heart problem. *"Getting regular medicine for her health problems was difficult during COVID times. She did not get ante natal care from the anganwadi in our basti. We could not afford the travel costs to Dhiraj hospital during her second pregnancy. But, doctors in Vadodara were not ready to take the risk and suggested we go to the same hospital where Kailas had her first delivery. We were all very tense. The ASHA from our basti did not support us at all. She did not even respond when we contacted her to accompany us to Dhiraj hospital when the delivery was expected. Instead, the ASHA from my wife's village came and stayed with Kailas, after we requested her. We all wanted a girl child so we planned this pregnancy, but even if we had a son this time, I clearly told Kailas that she should get a family planning operation done. More pregnancies are not good for her health. I want her to be healthy".*

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