Khushbu Kumari Helps Her Village Gear Up Against COVID-19

Khushbu Kumari is a student of grade 8 at Budhikura Middle School in Godda, Jharkhand. She is a member of the adolescent girls’ group in Budhikura village, which is about 30 kilometers away from Godda. This is the farthest village from Godda in terms of access to resources and communication.

Energetic and passionate, Khushbu has been an active participant in the school- and community-based sessions of the UMANG program. The 14-year-old has always been enthusiastic about attending the sports and group activities organized as part of these sessions.

When the UMANG sessions were halted on account of the lockdown, Khushbu was quite upset that she could not meet with her group and play with her friends for a while. As she watched the news on TV, she learned more about the danger that COVID-19 poses and about the health and safety precautions that must be taken to protect oneself – using protective masks when going out in public or interacting with others, following social distancing measures, and washing hands and maintaining hygiene.

Khushbu immediately contacted Shabnam, the UMANG peer mentor leading her adolescent girls’ group, to understand how her family and others could get masks since the lockdown made it difficult for anyone to leave their village. Shabnam shared with her a few online videos on how to make masks at home. Inspired by the videos, Khushbu tried to make a few masks at home using the resources available – some leftover cloth and her mother’s sewing machine.

Once she succeeded in making the first one, Khushbu gave it to her mother. She began making more to share with her family members and with other adolescent girls from her group. With encouragement and support from Shabnam, Khushbu began making masks and distributing them in her remote village in exchange for nominal charges to help make more masks for community members.

So far, Khushbu has made and distributed about 120 masks. Through her brilliant initiative, Khushbu is helping members of her community safeguard themselves from the threat of COVID-19.

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Dear readers,

I hope you and your loved ones are safe and healthy. The edition of UMANG Vaani comes to you in a time of global crisis. The spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has brought nations to a halt and has drastically changed the way we live our daily lives. Offices, schools and other economic, social and cultural institutions have been temporarily closed and people have been asked to practice social distancing to keep themselves and others around them safe.

Although this may be the “new normal” in the times to come, we must remember that we are united through a shared connection and a sense of belonging, and must work together toward achieving the goal of social justice.

In compliance with the lockdown restrictions, and in the interest of public health and safety, the field-level activities of the UMANG program – with adolescents, parents and community members – have been put on hold.

While considering the magnitude of the crisis at present, it is crucial to be cognizant of the unique vulnerabilities of various groups, particularly women and girls. Disconnected from schooling due to the nationwide lockdown, adolescent girls are finding themselves confined to their homes, bearing the burden of domestic work and caretaking. They face a heightened risk of violence and early marriage. Given prevailing social norms and gender inequalities, it is likely that many adolescent girls may be deprived of the opportunity to complete their education because of the COVID-19 fallout.

Our UMANG team is working tirelessly to reach out to adolescent girls and their families, and to develop strategies and interventions for mitigating the adverse impact of the lockdown. I am happy to share that UMANG team members from ICRW Asia and our partners SATHEE, Badlao Foundation and Project Concern International (PCI) have been at the forefront of community assistance and response activities in Godda and Jamtara districts of Jharkhand.

Ganesh Kumar, IAS
Deputy Commissioner, Jamtara

We are working closely with the government, district administration authorities, and other partners and stakeholders to provide support in various ways. Through a range of activities, including preparation and distribution of essential supplies, awareness generation campaigns on hygienic practices, etc., UMANG team members have been amplifying and strengthening the reach of government response activities.

It is heartening to share that many adolescent girls, who have been part of the UMANG program, have been actively leading and participating in response activities in their respective communities. While taking the necessary health and safety precautions themselves, they have done commendable work in ensuring that people in their communities also follow similar measures by making and distributing homemade protective masks, spreading awareness through social media, etc.

This special edition of UMANG Vaani highlights the response efforts of our team and partners in Godda and Jamtara. It also showcases a few brilliant initiatives by adolescent girls to help their communities in these difficult times.

We hope that this newsletter encourages and inspires others, and serves as a resource for all.

Wishing you all good health,

Dr. Ravi Verma
Regional Director, ICRW Asia
**UMANG Assists with Jharkhand Government’s Efforts**

UMANG team members in Godda and Jamtara districts, Jharkhand, are working closely with the respective district administration authorities to strengthen ongoing efforts and response activities to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on villages.

Volunteers and team members are spreading awareness on government programs and schemes launched as part of prevention and response efforts. They are also helping with the implementation of response activities and supporting awareness generation on entitlements for vulnerable and affected families under various relief schemes.

UMANG team members are monitoring social distancing at public distribution system (PDS) kiosks and are trying to ensure that the ration/supplies are being distributed as mandated by the government.

UMANG team members are working along with frontline community healthcare workers – Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) and Sahiyas. AWWs are involved in running Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS) centers, while Sahiyas are community-level volunteers from the health department, also known as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs). Together, they are orienting people on proper ways of hand washing as well as on sanitization.

In Godda, the district administration organized a one-day district level orientation on measures to respond to the pandemic. The event was facilitated by the health department. Around 15 UMANG volunteers from SATHEE also attended the event. Post the training, all trainees undertook field visits to help identify people with symptoms of COVID-19.

Badla Foundation has been designated as the “other NGO” to work on COVID-19 response activities along with the district administration in Jamtara. The **Rural Development Department, Government of Jharkhand** has been notified about the same by the district administration. In addition, Badla Foundation’s team is focusing on livelihood linkages and working with the district administration for provision of jobs within the Panchayat through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS).

UMANG has an MoU with the **Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS), Government of Jharkhand**, for the implementation of the UMANG program. UMANG team members from PCI undertook an assessment to understand the impact of the lockdown on the daily lives of community members. The team from PCI interacted with women representatives from 45 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) across Godda and Jamtara. The women reflected on the severe economic impact the crisis has had on them and their communities as for most daily wage work was the main source of their livelihood. The closure of local shops as per the lockdown restrictions has resulted in a further loss of earnings for them. They shared that they are living through their savings, which are depleting as well.

As a response to this crisis, the state government launched “sidi kitchens” at the panchayat level. Women from SHGs are leading these kitchens and at present, it is their only source of income. They are also engaged in the production of masks and sanitizers.

UMANG team members from PCI have also been supporting the government in identifying and listing migrant workers. Further, they are assisting in circulating knowledge and information on “bank didi” (representatives from SHGs helping with bank linkages to avail direct cash transfers as part of the state government’s COVID-19 response scheme) and didi helpline numbers.

**UMANG Team Members Raise Awareness Against COVID-19**

A report on various efforts made by the UMANG team to circulate information on recommended measures to prevent infection...

- ICRW Asia’s partners for the UMANG program – SATHEE and Badla Foundation – are working closely with district administration authorities and program team members to support behavior change communication campaigns to reduce risk of infection at the community level. Efforts include orienting villagers to the concept and practice of social distancing; raising awareness on proper techniques of washing hands as well as wearing masks; and discussing ways to enhance self-efficacy.

- Badla Foundation has taken steps to enhance awareness levels in villages of Jamtara district in Jharkhand through UMANG field facilitators and peer mentors, who are currently residing in their respective villages due to the nationwide lockdown. Many of these field facilitators and peer mentors have also volunteered their time to join COVID-19 response initiatives being implemented in their respective locations.

- As part of supporting the government’s joint response activities, UMANG team members have been reaching out to frontline community healthcare workers – such as ASHAs – and orienting them on preventive health and safety measures as well as use of sanitizers. The ASHAs, in turn, are reaching out to and educating households and community members.

- UMANG team members have also been reaching out directly to community members by organizing and conducting awareness generation activities, while taking adequate safety precautions and gearing up for protection against risk of infection. In Azfalpur village of the Nala block in Jamtara district, UMANG team members have been working closely with government appointed ASHAs and AWWs to raise awareness among community members, adolescents and their families on the restrictions of the lockdown and the importance of social distancing.

- UMANG team members visited 150 households along with ASHAs and AWWs, while maintaining appropriate safety measures, to inform and educate the families on washing hands and social distancing. A small meeting was conducted (with adequate precautions) at the village temple, with a few frontline workers and the head of Gram Panchayat (village level elected body for governance) in attendance, to discuss the relief schemes introduced under the ambit of the Jharkhand Chief Minister’s Office (Mukhya Mantri Manav Seva Pujja) and provision of health support to migrant workers returning to their villages. During such community-level sessions, UMANG team members have been distributing face masks and training people on their proper use.

- UMANG team members have also been educating community members on how to practice social distancing in various activities on a daily basis. Collection of drinking water is an essential daily chore and requires a visit to the community tap or hand pump. There is likelihood of a crowd gathering around water sources, which, in turn, increases the risk of infection. UMANG team members aided villagers in marking clear positions with chalk circles (6 feet apart from one another) near water sources. This has helped people in keeping adequate distance from each other and avoiding contact while waiting for their turn to collect water.

- In Godda district, UMANG team members distributed sanitization kits to 250 families across 11 villages of Godda and Mahagama blocks. Team members supported a few adolescents in the distribution activities (with adequate health and safety precautions) so that they could reach out to families in their neighborhood regarding preventive health measures, with a special emphasis on care for the elderly.
UMANG Partners Support COVID-19 Relief Initiatives

UMANG partners help in the distribution of food, essential supplies, and sanitization kits...

About 73 percent of the population of Godda and Jamtara districts, Jharkhand, lives in rural areas. The primary sources of livelihood in these areas are agriculture and daily wage work. The lockdown on account of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on people here and, it has brought all activities to a grinding halt. Among the residents here, migrant laborers, farmers, women and girls have been the most affected. On April 12, 2020, UMANG team members distributed ration/essential supplies, protective masks (made of khadi cloth), soap and sanitizers among the most vulnerable families at Kewatjai Ashram in Jamtara, supported by Badlao Foundation. Further, similar sanitization kits and rations were distributed among 65 vulnerable families currently residing near railway tracks at Mihijam in Jamtara.

Badlao Foundation also came to the aid of adolescent girls living in 27 UMANG intervention villages in Nala and blocks in Jamtara. Protective masks and soap were distributed among adolescent girls. Adequate safety and health precautions were taken and information about such measures were shared with community members during the activity.

UMANG members from SATHEE also distributed sanitization kits among 350 families across 11 villages in Godda and Mahagama blocks in Godda district. Team members encouraged adolescent girls to participate (while observing adequate safety practices) in the training sessions on the distribution and use of these sanitization kits so that they could inform and educate their families and community members, particularly the elderly.

In addition, SATHEE also supplied sanitization kits, ration, oil and other essentials to about 500 families in Boarijor and Sunderpahari blocks.

The government has implemented multiple measures to ensure that essential supplies and commodities are regularly available to vulnerable populations through its Grahak Seva Kendras (Customer Help Centers).

UMANG team members have been generating awareness on such government support and relief schemes as well as health and safety practices at the centers. They have also been assisting people in accessing the relief cash entitlements provided by the government and helping them get it credited to their bank accounts.

Yasmin and Nasima are two 15-year-old girls who reside in Samri village of Godda district, Jharkhand. The girls are close friends and enthusiastic participants in the community-based group sessions organized for adolescent girls under the UMANG program.

In 2019, both Nasima and Yasmin had left school before they completed their grade 8 and grade 7 respectively. They dropped out due to poverty and the financial burden of enrolling in schools. They later were enrolled in a government-run school under the Jharkhand Samajwadi Mukhyamantri Shiksha Yojana (JSLPS) scheme of the Government of Jharkhand.

Recently, the UMANG group sessions were halted in compliance with the nationwide lockdown restrictions. Despite the circumstances, Yasmin and Nasima remained in contact with each other and with Ishrat. They engaged regularly in discussions on various issues including their studies, the lockdown and its impact, among other matters.

As part of the response efforts and activities, Ishrat was asked to prepare a list of vulnerable people and families in the village to aid the distribution of sanitization kits and essential supplies. Together, Yasmin and Nasima, took on the responsibility of coordinating and collating the list based on their knowledge of their community and its members. They also went the extra mile and assisted with the distribution of the kits.

Both girls took all the necessary precautions themselves while reaching out to their community members and helping with the distribution activities. These girls have inspired other adolescents like them to step up and contribute to their community.
Badlao Foundation undertook a quick assessment to understand the prevailing situation owing to the COVID-19 pandemic in 27 villages in the Jamtara and Nala blocks in Jamtara, Jharkhand. The assessment focused on the migrant laborers who returned to their villages (due to loss of employment) before and during the lockdown. The objective was to document the challenges faced by communities and to share the details of the same with local elected representatives for expediting solutions. The organization conducted a survey on the health facilities and essential services made available to the people. Key findings of this assessment have been highlighted in the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status of migrants in the surveyed communities</th>
<th>Number of migrated laborers in the surveyed communities</th>
<th>Number of migrant laborers who returned out of total</th>
<th>Number of returned migrants with cold, cough and fever</th>
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<td>surveyed</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>102</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
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UMANG team members in these villages, Anup Mandal and Sativiti Soren, informed the block level health team at Nala about the 22 migrants with complaints of cold, cough and fever. They were counselled and referred to the nearest District Hospital in Jamtara, where they underwent thermal screening and were provided with suitable medication. Later, it was reported that they are recovering post treatment.

It was also observed that besides the 22 migrant workers (who were identified as ill), there were 36 other community members who were sick but had not sought medical help as they feared being screened and quarantined. They were counselled and taken for testing with assistance from the local healthcare departments. None of them have health issues at present.

Across these 27 villages, about 389 families were living in extreme poverty and hunger owing to loss of employment. Daily wage work was the main livelihood for most of them. UMANG team members made a note of these families and tried to ensure that they get essential supplies/ration along with supportive cash entitlements in their respective bank accounts. These facilities are being provided by the Government of Jharkhand in the wake of the ongoing crisis.

UMANG team members are also reaching out and circulating information on government helpline numbers for health and safety concerns. Some of the helplines have been shared here in the newsletter. We request readers to circulate this information through their network.

Acknowledgements

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For information about this newsletter or the relief work highlighted here, please contact the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point Person</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Mobile Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Nasreen Jamal</td>
<td>ICCRW Asia</td>
<td>9431391359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sushmita Mukherjee</td>
<td>PCI</td>
<td>8920132942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Neeraj Kumar</td>
<td>SATHEE</td>
<td>7004905488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arvind Kumar</td>
<td>Badlao Foundation</td>
<td>8210932507</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ICCRW Ranchi Office:
405, 4th Floor, Krishna Mall, Ashok Nagar, Between Road No. 182, Opposite Central GST Office, Ranchi - Jharkhand - 834002
Tel: 0651-2244416/2244417

ICCRW Asia Regional Office:
C-59, South Ext. Part II, New Delhi-110049
Tel.: 91-11-4664.3333
Fax: 91-11-2463.5142
Email: info.india@iccrw.org