

Single Women Agents of Change



Stories
of Struggle

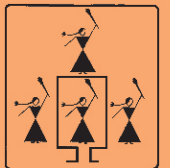


Canada

Publication supported by the
Canada Fund For Local Initiatives



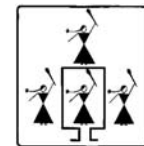
Ekal Nari
Shakti Sangathan



Ekal Nari
Shakti Sangathan

**SINGLE WOMEN-
AGENTS OF CHANGE**

STORIES OF STRUGGLE



Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SINGLE WOMEN – AGENTS OF CHANGE Stories of Struggle

Written and Compiled by: Ms. Chandrakala Sharma

Edited by: Ginny Shrivastava and Parul Chaudhary

English Translation: Ms. Anamika Srivastava

Typing and Setting, Cover Design: Raj Kumar Jalora

Acknowledgements

The Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI)
Canadian High Commission, New Delhi

Any part of this book may be used by
those working For Women's Rights

Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan, Rajasthan
3 Pipala House
Raj Bhawan Road, Civil Lines,
Kota, Rajasthan 324008, India
Phone: 0744 2450726
Email: ensskota@gmail.com

Published: October 2019, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India

	Page
Foreword	i
1. Violence Against Women	1
2. Liquor Shops and Drunkards	12
3. Education	20
4. Communal Harmony and Social Inclusion	28
5. Against Corruption	38
6. Breaking Cruel Customs	47
7. Witch Hunting	58
8. Claiming Legal Rights	66
9. Brave Single Women	82
10. Accessing Government Entitlements	91
11. Running the Counseling Centre, the "MSSK" in Kota	102
12. An Overview - 20 Years of the Association of Strong Women Alone	107
Appendices	116
No. 1. Census Data about Numbers of Single Women in India	
No. 2. Contacts for Single Women Organizations in Other States of India	
No. 3. Chart of the structure of the Association of Strong Women Alone	

FOREWORD

The journey from a group of 450 rural low-income widows, meeting for 4 days in Bassi Town, District Jaipur, Rajasthan in 1999, to a Rajasthan state-wide organization of 69,083 widows, separated, divorced, older-never-married women in 2019 has been a journey to celebrate! On the occasion of the “Celebrating Sisterhood Convention”, 2019, we are indeed also celebrating the creation of the Association of Strong Women Alone – Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan – 20 years ago!

We started out with the objective to bring into existence a mass-membership organization of Single Women which would work to help each other solve their problems. The organization would be led by Single Women, not implementing any “project” but responding to the issues raised by Single Women in their lives in the hamlets, villages, towns and cities of the state. At first, it was often an issue related to a widow pension. And then, since there were no pensions for separated, or divorced women, advocacy turned to trying to convince the government to provide this social security benefit to them as well. Success! And then, helping each other to get possession of land and property rights, which were theirs legally, but which had been illegally occupied by others – brothers-in-law, or village men who were neighbours. Through their collective action, courage and strategizing, that too led to “success”.

All the while, the membership kept growing – Single Women who heard about the organization wanted work started in their area, they too wanted to become members. Today, the organization has work going on in all 33 Districts of Rajasthan. The collective of Single Women has given the women back their self-confidence; it has given them information about society's laws, structures, schemes and resources; it has helped them analyze why they have been made to feel marginalized and vulnerable; they have found their “voice” and hundreds of them have become leaders in their communities.

What one can observe is that in the beginning, they wanted to work on the problems and issues that concerned themselves -- their survival issues of getting the small government pensions that are their right to social security benefits as citizens, getting a place to live (since marital and natal family members too often do not welcome them for the long term, particularly if they have dependent children), employment and access to means of production so they can earn to buy food. But as their confidence grows, as they see change that is the result of their collective action, as they realize they are not “alone” but have found a place in a “new family”, they take on issues of society that need to be “put right”! Low-income Single Women are compassionate, they know how it feels to be “down”; they have tenacity, once they take up a cause, they do not stop until at least some success is achieved; they are strong and brave, often with nothing to lose and everything to gain!

In this small booklet, you will find case studies of collective actions by the Single Women members of the “Association of Strong Women Alone, Rajasthan” on a number of society's problems – corruption, cruel caste and community customs, violence against women, communal conflict, excessive liquor consumption, land grab, and more.

What we see, is that in the space of 20 years, widows, separated, divorced, older-never-married women have helped each other to solve many of their problems -- and continue to do so – but they have also moved on and are taking action on societal problems that affect us all – as “Agents of Change”. In many communities, they have moved from the margins into the centre – calling meetings, leading actions.

The Rajasthan Association has also been in the lead in helping low-income Single Women in other states of India to get organized to help each other, and reach out, to work on large issues. “The National Forum for Single Women's Rights”, up to now, has supported Single Women in 10 States and 1 Union Territory to get organized, and the goal is to spread to

all states of India. Other groups and organizations across the country are starting to work with Single Women, seeing them as Strong Women, and not Weak Women.

In many ways, this is just the beginning! Twenty years is not long in the history of India. It will indeed be exciting to see what this rather large population of Single Women do in the future! They are entering the political sphere through local self-government institutions; they are working on climate change through organic and natural farming practices; their large numbers enable them to monitor girls' education in schools and hostels. And more.....

We all hope that as you read these case studies, you will feel inspired to think – “If they can do it, I can do it too!”

Dr. Ginny Shrivastava
Udaipur, Rajasthan
November, 2019

1. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

**Voice Against Exploitation
and
Violence Against Women**



Break the silence against Violence
Until when are we going to endure and remain quiet....

It's an irony that today, our Indian society is heading towards freedom and modernity while in the social backdrop, the narrow-mindedness towards women is increasing. Women are considered weak and in a secondary position in the mindset of the patriarchal society. It's the mindset that has to be changed. The government has made several laws to prevent violence and exploitation of women. Yet the atrocities on women are on still increasing -- eve teasing, rape and murder have created a very terrifying and unsafe environment for women and girls. Today, women are safe nowhere, and that's why it's essential for young girls to learn at a very early age – that they should not endure violence or outrage; instead they should learn to face these atrocities, and fight if necessary. Until we confront injustice, nothing would change, no matter how many laws are made.

We all know so well, how the society looks upon “single women”. It considers them weak and pitiable, that they can be treated in “any old way” because single women would tolerate injustice and misbehavior. But it is not like that anymore, for Single Women who are organized and aware! The women who are part of the Association of Strong Women Alone (ASWA) are very self-sufficient, and have quadrupled their strength. Now they will not bear any sort of violence; they stand strong to oppose it. We are sharing a few stories and experiences of some of these single women.

Shayari Ran Away with the Clothes of the Rapists

Shayari Bai says, “had I lost courage then, my world would have turned upside down. But I did not give up, I ran to the police station with the clothes of the rapists. The rapists had to run naked to the police station. Those who had come to rape me, ran naked on the streets! I got all this courage from ASWA.”

Shayari Bai of Bhilwada District, Hurda Tehsil, is not considered a weak person in any way. Shayari proved this about her to be true.

Shayari is a member of the Block Committee. One day, she mentioned in the Block Committee meeting that one night, at about 11 p.m., Hansraj, a Jat from her village, had a tiff with her. He forcibly took her to a room and threatened her: “today I will either rape you or kill you”.



Shayari Bai replied, “you will either rape me or kill me..... then do one thing, spread my lugdi or odhni – (long piece of cloth to wrap around over skirt and blouse of a woman), and then undress yourself and leave your clothing outside”. Hansraj did accordingly. She then asked him to turn off the lamp. While Hansraj was doing that, Shayari Bai took all his clothes and she ran straight to the Hurda police station. The staff there was drunk, and that was the reason why she had to return home. She could not sleep the whole night because she was scared that Hansraj would attack her again. The following day Shayari Bai went to Gulabpura and got herself photographed with Hansraj's clothes in her hands. Then she went to Gulabpura police station to hand over Hansraj's clothes to them, and narrated everything and asked the policemen there to file a First Information Report (FIR). Hansraj, in the meanwhile, went to Shayari's house and robbed Rs. 3,000 and gold ornaments. He also burnt her hut and absconded. The inspector did not file a report for 2-3 days. Then Shayari told them about ASWA and said, “don't think I am alone! If the sisters of the organization came here, then you will run helter-skelter.” The Inspector then took the information of ASWA, filed a Report, and took action. In the meanwhile Shayari took a few single women from the District Committee of the Association of Strong Women Alone, and gave a complaint letter to the Additional Collector of District Bhilwara, as a result of which, Hansraj was arrested in 3 days.

After a few days, Hansraj was released on bail. He went to Shayari's field, and hit her on the head with a stone. Shayari's head was bleeding and she fell unconscious. When she regained her senses, she went to the Police station. No body heard and helped her there. Shayari Bai told the whole story to the members of ASWA. The sisters of the organization went to the police station and questioned the Inspector about why he did not take any action in Shayari Bai's case. They added that if the Inspector did not do his duty, then they would file a case against the Inspector as well as Hansraj! They presented all the proof that Shayari Bai had. Then

the Inspector, with great respect and assurance of action, asked the members of the Association to sit down.

When the policemen went to arrest Hansraj, they came to know that he was absconding from the village. They took Shayari Bai's statement and also the statements of Manju Bai and Narbada Bai from the organization. They promised them immediate action. After a few days, Hansraj was arrested and he was imprisoned. Shayari Bai says, "if I was alone, nothing would have been possible. All this happened because I went with the sisters of ASWA." Now Shayari Bai is so courageous that she does not fear anybody.

Not Only Strangers, but Loved Ones are Also Not to be Trusted

Savithri says, "in today's world, one should not trust even one's own relatives. They are not trustworthy. And for a widow, it is even worse. The family members and the outsiders assume she is their "property". Times are changing but the mindset of some people doesn't change easily."



Savithri, a 40 year old widow, is a resident of Jhalarapatan of Jhalawar District. She has been associated with ASWA for the last 12 years; she is a strong and active member of the organization. She has a son and a daughter; she became a widow when her children were quite young. She moved to her maternal home with them. She worked really hard to provide for her children. Her father's home was on the outskirts of the village; she was living in an unfinished room that her father had given her. She could not afford a cooler or a fan, so she was forced in summers to sleep in the open area outside her room. Three years ago, while Savithri was asleep, her male cousin came and sat on the corner of her cot. He was rubbing his penis to excite himself sexually. Just then, Savithri got

up from her sleep; she kicked him with her leg and he fell on the floor. She thrashed him vigorously with a stick. The other family members gathered to find out the reason for the commotion in the night. When Savithri expressed that she wanted to file a report, the rest of them asked her not to do so, her cousin also apologized.

Two years later, one day at around 11 a.m. when Savithri was washing clothes, she went into the house to bring something. She saw the same cousin of hers standing naked right in front of her! He tried to hold Savithri, but she hit him hard with her knees in his crotch, and then she ran out screaming for help. She called the sisters of ASWA over her phone. She filed a complaint at the police station. The family members were of the opinion that Savithri's cousin would not repeat the mistake again. But the members of the organisation said that punishment was the only remedy for his shameful act, not once, but two times! Just because Savithri was living in her maternal home, did not mean that she could be exploited by family members and relatives, or that she was an open opportunity....

Savithri took up a course in self-defense. She says these days, self-defense can be of help anywhere. Today Savithri is so strong that she is not afraid of anybody.

The Fear of "Vultures" Even in the Marital Home

Some in society think about single women that -- "She is a characterless woman, which is why her husband has left her." "She is roaming around with other men." "She is a spoilt women, she has no right to live." "These women should be out-casted from the society and they should be killed."

No women would be called infamous.

If only the men mend their ways...



Churu District - Champa, 28 years old, is a resident of Ranghirsar village, Ratangarh Block. She was married at the age of 12. Soon she was a mother of 2 children. Champa's husband did not keep her well, she was leading an abandoned life. He was interested in other women. But her father-in-law was interested in her, as she was very beautiful! The mother-in-law would get furious seeing his interest in her. She started looking for avenues to blame Champa about her

character. One day, she sent Champa's brother-in-law along with Champa with an evil plan. Her nandoi (brother-in-law) spoke to her very sweetly, and when they reached a canal, he asked her to jump into the canal along with her son. He assured her that he would also jump into the canal after them to save them if there was any trouble. Champa refused. In the village, her mother-in-law spread the rumour that Champa had eloped with somebody. Hearing this, the villagers were all furious, and they took out a rally / procession against Champa. They wanted to kill her, because such women tainted the whole society.

Champa's mother was a widow and a member of ASWA. She went to Mukesh Joshi, a leader in the organization, and asked for help. She told her that they had kidnapped her daughter and were defaming her. The sisters of the organization investigated the case and went to Sandwa police station to file a report. They held a meeting in the village along with the marital family and the villagers. The members of ASWA said, "if something happens to Champa, then everyone involved would have to

face the consequences." All this took place in the presence of the police.

Champa now lives with dignity in her marital home. She thanks the organization for saving her life and dignity. Although Champa was not a single woman, her mother was a member of the Association and so the single women members lent full support in solving Champa's problem.

"So What If Your Husband Died, I am Alive, You Can Be Mine..."

We all know that beating is not the only kind of violence against women. Single women are tortured emotionally, physically, sexually and financially. Women are exploited in several ways, either to grab her property or to "have the woman"

Suman Bairva, age 27 years, is a widow of Alwar District, Thanagazi Block, Angaari Panchayat. She is a member of the Block Committee of ASWA. She said in a meeting. "It is one year since the death of my husband. We are three sisters living in the same house, and my husband was the youngest. My marital family wanted me to marry my late husband's elder brother (who already had a wife – my elder sister!), but I did not want to marry him. I have a son. My older sister agreed with me. But my husband's brother held my hand in front of everybody and said that he would marry me and treat me like a queen.

When I opposed, he replied that he would marry me by force or else make me repent my decision! Suman said, how can I be the other woman in my sister's life? When Suman told all this to the Block Committee members, they decided to talk to my brother-in-law. A few of the committee members went to Suman's residence and told her marital family that they had no right to persuade her to get married

against her choice. The sisters of ASWA made it very clear that if they pressurized Suman for the marriage, they could be punished and imprisoned. Her mother-in-law and brother-in-law asked the members of ASWA to stay out of their personal affairs. The members of the organization replied that it was not a personal affair any more. The matter had come to the organization and now the organization was involved in dealing with it. They made the brother-in-law understand well that a woman cannot be forced into marriage. They threatened to take severe action against him, if he tried doing anything like that.

He was really petrified and assured them he would not do anything against the will of Suman. The members of ASWA asked Suman what she wanted to do, where did she want to live? Suman replied that she wanted to stay in her marital home provided they did not trouble her. She added that if her in-laws turned into trouble-makers again, she would complain to the Association. She agreed that the sisters of ASWA saved her life from getting ruined. And her sisters were very happy with her. So she was living a peaceful life now, with the help of ASWA.



“Everything Is Possible” For Those Determined to Get Justice

Manni Bai, age 45, is a widow from the Bhil tribal community and a resident of Ladpura Block, Kota District. All of a sudden, her pension was suspended. A reputed person of the village took her to a hotel under the guise of taking her to the pension office. She was raped at the hotel and was threatened that if she mentioned about this to any body, the “reputed person” would kill her and her children.



Slowly, he tried to bring men into her home. Manni Bai summoned courage and told everything to the Ward Councilor of her village. A few of the villagers came along with Manni Bai to the ASWA office. They narrated everything that had happened to Manni Bai. With repeated efforts from the Association of Strong Women Alone, 4 months after the rape, a report was filed with the police. However, the police were not interested in filing the case in the court because the rapist was a powerful man (“reputed person”) and he had bribed the police well. Manni Bai received several threats to withdraw her case; she was also ostracized from her caste group.

Manni Bai was determined. This was her fight for her self-respect. ASWA gave complete support to Manni Bai and ultimately, the rapist got a jail term of 6 years. Everyone was surprised that ASWA was able to get justice for Manni Bai for a crime that was committed four months prior to filing a police case. The sisters of the Organization just said, “Everything is possible”!

A Revenue Officer (Tehsildar), Who Tried Molesting an ASWA Member, Was Sent to Jail by the Single Women of the Association

These days women are safe no where. Whether it's home, office, or anywhere else. Men are like vultures trying to hover over them all the time, waiting for a chance to molest them. Something like this happened to a member of the Association of Strong Women Alone. Santosh Nama faced it bravely and made sure the culprit was imprisoned.

Santosh Nama, is a resident of Piplada panchayat , Itawa Block, Kota District. Santosh works at the Rajiv Gandhi Service Centre as an employment officer. While she was working at her office, the peon from the Tehsildar's office informed her that the Tehsildar wanted to meet her at his residence for some work. Santosh went to meet the Tehsildar. The Tehsildar, Onkarlal Meena, told the peon to leave as he had some important work with Santosh. When the peon left, the Tehsildar shut the door and started having an unnecessary and inappropriate conversation with Santosh. When she objected, he started to molest her. Santosh managed to escape from there, but Onkarlal came behind chasing her and he asked her not to mention about this to anybody.

Santosh was sobbing and was running towards her office at the Rajiv Gandhi Centre. On her way, she happened to meet Akila Bano, a member of the District Committee of ASWA. Santosh narrated everything to Akila, and to other Association members present there, as well as the Sarpanch.

In no time all, the villagers assembled and they went to the Tehsildar's house. Akila Bano dragged the Tehsildar out of his chair, and gave him one good slap on his cheeks! The Tehsildar began apologizing

to Santosh, and said he would do what ever he was asked to do. Akila and Santosh said, “now the police will handle this”, and they took him to the police station in the Sarpanch's vehicle.

The police were refusing to file a report; a few politicians called the police asking them not to file a report against the Tehsildar. Akila Bano made a phone call to the District Collector and told him everything. The Collector ordered the police to file a case immediately. A report was filed under IPC section 354 and 342 – “criminal assault on a woman with the intent to outrage her modesty” and “wrongful confinement”.

The police and the Collector's office commenced investigations simultaneously, but no body was willing to give a statement against the Tehsildar. The Tehsildar was forcing Akila to change her statement and become an official witness. But Akila was certain that she would stand only for the truth. While the investigations were on, the Tehsildar was demoted, and when he was proved guilty, he was suspended. Later on, the ward members told Santosh that if she did not change her statement she would no longer have her job. The members of ASWA then met the higher officials and told them everything; they assured them that nobody could throw Santosh out of her job.

This way, with the help of the members of ASWA, the Tehsildar was sent to jail and the other government officials also got a glimpse of what would happen to them if they misbehaved with women.



2. LIQUOR AND DRUNKARDS

**The Liquor Shops Had to be Shut Down ...
Such Was the Power of the Organisation**



The women of the Association of Strong Women Alone - ASWA said in one voice, “for now, 4 liquor shops have been shut down, due to the power of the organisation, and the liquor barons are totally helpless because the women have decided that they will not endure any more torture and harassment from drunken men in their villages”.

Consumption of alcohol is considered a very bad habit in our culture, and drinking is increasing at a very high rate amongst the youngsters. Apart from the addiction to liquor, the graph of women tortured, and violence against women, is also increasing very quickly. Liquor is a big barrier to our healthy and developing society, because if a member of the family is addicted to it, his family condition deteriorates in the society, both financially and socially.

In most of the rural areas, many drunkards and antisocial elements gather together near the liquor shops. In their everyday life, these groups indulge in betting, abusing, fighting, swearing and eve-teasing.

People of our decent society personally are against these activities, but nobody raises their voice against the liquor shops. However, the women of the Association, united and mobilized, have shown courage and fervor by challenging the liquor contractors one after another in different regions of the state of Rajasthan. As a result of their strength, strong opposition and struggle, they have gotten the liquor hubs closed in several places in Ajmer, Pali, Baran, Nagaur, and Alwar. They have proved **“we have neither lost nor will we ever lose; we have not promised this to anybody else, but to ourselves.”**

District Baran - Amri Bai, resident of Atru Block, Piplod panchayat says **“though I am uneducated, yet I have gotten so much information, self confidence, and power, such that along with other women of the village, we fought and won for our rights and respect.”** This is the story of struggle of the



women of Piplod panchayat who have taken strong steps to eliminate the bad effects of alcohol consumption -- violence against women, crime and increasing alcohol addiction amongst the youth.

Ghisi Bai, Amri Bai, Kelashi Bai, and Kastoori Bai are strong members of the Block Committee of ASWA, and they have a strong presence in the village. After seeing that this huge problem of the village kept surfacing, resulting in suicides, violence against women, and other crimes, these single women organization leaders sat with the village women and took a decision -- come what may, the liquor shops in the village had to be closed!

All the women reached Baran with a memorandum to the District Collector and made him aware of the serious problems caused by the

liquor shops. The District Collector directed them to the Excise Department, but nothing was easy. The Excise Department showed their evasive nature and said that they wanted a time period of 8 days to plan and prepare, but 15 days went by and it appeared as if they had an understanding between themselves and the liquor mafias. What was to happen next?

The patience of the group of women broke loose. They gathered more women and took out a rally, and a campaign of breaking the bottles in the shops began. Then the administration became strict and the shops were closed in a hurry. But this did not go down well with the chauvinistic male society -- that the women folk had succeeded in getting the alcohol shops closed. It was a huge blow to their manhood. Now the liquor shop owners started selling the alcohol quietly from their homes. When the group of women led by strong women of the Association of Strong Women Alone confronted them, these women were threatened with death, rape and kidnapping .

Ghisi Bai, of Piplod, tells that after the wine shops were closed, she was going from one of the main pathways of the village, when 10-15 anti-social elements sitting at one cross-road playing cards and drinking alcohol, surrounded her and said **“you are trying to be a big revolutionary, we will rip off all of your arrogance and you will not know what hit you. Seeing you other women will also learn a lesson.”**

With great difficulty, Ghisi bai saved her life and went to the village, where she told about all this to the rest of the women. All of the women reached the police station and filed an FIR against the anti-social elements. When the police officer was not ready to file a Report, the women said that if the case was not accepted, they would approach authorities in Jaipur or even go up to New Delhi. After 5 long hours of persuasion, the police arrested the culprit who threatened the women,

after they filed the FIR (First Information Report). The liquor contractor got scared and he stopped selling liquor from home.

The village now has a very peaceful atmosphere, and when this news was published by the media, everybody appreciated the women's persistence and action.

When this news was published in the newsletter, “The Voice of Single Women” (Ekal Nari ki Aawaz), then women from other Districts got to know about the Baran District women's action. Now, they too decided they were not going to stay quiet! They also started a campaign against alcohol, and this news of banning alcohol spread quickly to Pali, Nagaur, Alwar and also Ajmer.

Those Who Try Never Fail

<i>Mutka bottle tor do,</i>	Break the earthen pot, break the bottle,
<i>Daru peena chor do!</i>	Quit drinking liquor!
<i>Aurat ka dushman kaun hai?</i>	Who is the enemy of women?
<i>Daru hai, Daru hai.</i>	It is liquor, It is liquor!

With these energetic slogans, so began the protests against the wine shops in Sojat Block of Pali District. The 5 day campaign of protest against the wine shop finally made the liquor dealer remove his shop. “Those who try, never fail.” - Geetha

Pali District, Sojat Block

Geetha of Narsinghpura panchayat tells us ... In one of the Block Committee meetings of the



Association of Strong Women Alone, the women reported about the problems arising from the wine shop; near the shop, the women were witness to anti-social behavior, like eve-teasing, etc. The drunkards were making it difficult for women to move about, even on the regular roads in and near the village. Then the single women took a decision to remove the wine shop with the help of villagers and the people's representatives.

The women reached the police station and as usual, the police with their “dilly dallying” attitude said that they were helpless, and were not ready even to hear what all the women had to say. With a lot of persuasion, the police finally spoke to the wine shop owner, but they refused to remove the shop.

The women did not give up, and reached the Collector of Pali District. Under the leadership of Geetha, Durga, Kanchan, and Shayari, the women decided to put up a tent before the wine shop and protest for 5 days. They took out a rally with a lot of support of the villagers and media, and finally, faced with their strong determination, the wine shop owner came forward and showed that the shop is legal and had a license. So then the women and villagers began to press the wine shop owner to change the place of the shop. The wine shop was removed from the main settlement of the village.

The villagers agreed with the powerful demands of the women's Association. In spite of being uneducated, they had so much courage. Durga says that if we take a vow, then nothing is impossible. The women acknowledged that they need the spirit which the organization has given them.

We Will Die, But Will Never Let Them Open the Wine Shop - Shushila.

Alwar - The non-stoppable waves of an anti-liquor campaigns began rising in other Districts, and it reached Alwar too. The women protested against a wine shop opening in Village Basi, Thanagazi Block of Alwar District, and the wine shop was closed even before it could open!

The shop owner had gotten all the required building material to construct his wine shop, and had started the construction work. When this news reached the village ASWA members, they could not tolerate the thought of a wine shop there in their village, and brought this problem for discussion in the Block Committee meeting in Thanagazi. Sushila and one other member, Akila Bano, took a decision that if there was going to be a wine shop in the village, then the atmosphere was not going to be safe for women and the children would also be affected. All the members said in one voice that the village will not allow any wine shop to come up!

The members of the organisation gathered and went to the contractor and said that he could not establish his shop there. When the contractor said that he had every right to have his shop there because the land on which he was building his shop belonged to him, he had purchased it. Even after repeatedly making him understand the problems his shop would create for the women and children of the village, he did not agree to stop construction. This news spread in the village like wildfire, and other villagers, the Sarpanch and the police reached there.



The Sarpanch turned towards the women folk and told them that only they could stop the wine shop construction. The police threatened the women's group with imprisonment, for trying to stop a man from constructing a shop on land which he owned. At this, the women also threatened the police telling them they were part of a large Rajasthan-wide Association, and said, **“we are ready to die. but will not allow them to construct the wine shop here”**. On hearing this, then the police changed their tune, and said “when the women are not willing to have a wine shop there, why is the wine shop owner forcibly going ahead with the construction?”.

The wine shop owner did not agree and the workmen on the site started the JCB, (the “backhoe” earth moving construction machine). The women almost clung to the JCB and they threatened to come in front of the moving JCB if the contractor did not stop the work immediately! The JCB operator stopped the JCB and said to the contractor that he would not proceed with the work. The contractor understood that he could have no say in front of these women and told them **“ you won and I lost”**.

The women of the organisation had collectively stopped the construction of the wine shop in the village! The villagers were all in praise for the women of the Association, and said, if not for the determination and fervor of the women's organization, the wine shop would have certainly opened in their village.

We Can!

Kavita from Nagaur Block Committee tells us
“Before, I never came out of my home and hardly spoke. It was surprising how I, along with the other members of ASWA, got the courage to get the wine shop of Dolia Village closed. The Association of Strong Women Alone is the only organization which encourages us and gives us the courage to make “the impossible” – “possible”!



Kavita - Ladnun Block, District Nagaur

Together, ASWA Women Take On the World!

Mamta from Ajmer, Jaunsganj Colony, tells that the Association of Strong Women Alone is our life, and together, we are like a storm (toofan)! In our District, when a wine shop was established, it was difficult for us to get it closed. Then for many days, we protested and took out a rally against it. Then the wine shop was closed. Without this Association, all this wouldn't have been so easy.



Mamta, Ajmer City



3. EDUCATION

The Single Women Members of the Association of Strong Women Alone Know the Importance of Education



- The single women joined a campaign to improve Rajasthan's Primary Education, and they inspected 456 schools of the state, as part of a larger campaign.
- The objective was to ensure that children get quality basic education facilities.
- The campaign brought an awareness amongst people, that 'unless you understand your responsibilities there cannot be scope for improvement'.
- The single women set an example that concern about children's education has no age limits.

Low-income Single Women are usually not well educated because they didn't get an opportunity to pursue their education. But they know the importance of education and they have proved it by showing that there is no age limit for being concerned about children's education. They are also worried about a bright future for children, because they know very well that children are the future of a country.

There are many schools run by the government, but the education

system does not oversee construction of sound school buildings, and maintenance is often lacking. This is one of the reasons why many parents do not wish to send their children to these government schools. While the women were inspecting the schools, they noticed that the poor and deprived children are the ones to get enrolled in these schools.

This Education Campaign was launched by the “Rajasthan Patrika Media Action Group” (a Hindi Rajasthan daily Newspaper group) which ran a one-year Campaign¹, called the Neev Shiksha ka Sawal Campaign, or “A Question About the Foundation for Education Campaign”. The objective was to improve the conditions of schools and to ensure quality education. It was based on the principle that the foundation has to be strong if you want to construct a strong building. The single women of ASWA joined hands with the campaign and played an important role in inspecting Primary Schools.



To bring about state-wide changes, the most useful persons to involve in the campaign would be the common citizens. The involvement of the common citizens was important in this project. They were asked to make contact with their neighboring schools, and to keep an important connect among the parents, teachers, the citizens and the supporting organization (in this case, ASWA).

Through RTI (Right to Information), the citizens were asked to bring out information about the functioning and facilities of government Primary Schools in their villages, towns and cities. As a result of this campaign, a few RTI applications were accepted seeking information

¹ 1st March 2015 to February 2016

about the operation of some schools in various parts of the state -- from students, or their parents or other social bodies.

Under this campaign, hundreds of members of ASWA inspected 456 schools and participated fully in the campaign! They enjoyed the experience of being welcomed to a school, as a representative of a state-wide campaign of Rajasthan Patrika, even though they themselves had never gone to or completed Primary School! Here they were, “inspecting” a government Primary School! They gave suggestions about improvements to the Principal and teachers of these schools. They brought awareness amongst parents, that they should also understand their responsibilities if they want better education for their children, and they should sit together with the Principal and teachers to find a solution for any problem that arises.



The Association of Strong Women Alone contributed to this campaign and has proved that Single Women are also strong citizens and work towards the progress and betterment of the country in a variety of ways. We are now sharing a few experiences from this campaign.

It Was a Concern for the Future of the Children.

How Could I keep Quiet?

Premwati was uneducated, but she always said, “ Don't underestimate me; with my courage I can do anything that I decide to do! The Association is my strength.”

Premvati is a poor widow of Dholpur District, Bari Block, Naksoda Panchayat. She has been a part of the Association for the last 8 years. Premvati was a part of the Neev Siksha Ka Sawal campaign and was assigned the duty of inspecting schools.



Premvati had a complaint about the government school in Naksoda. There was no water or electricity facility in this school. The children had to go across the highway to drink water. It was dangerous for them to cross the highway. Premvati spoke to the villagers and the elected representatives about these issues, but she could not get a solution to the problems. Troubled by their responses, Premvati went to meet the District Collector of Dholpur with 8 members of ASWA. Suchi Tyagi, the District Collector made them wait for a long time and then came out of her office to proceed to another meeting, without meeting them. Premwati caught hold of the Collector's hand, stopped her, and told her about the Water and Electricity problem in the village school. She told her about the Association of Strong Women Alone as well.

About a fortnight later, electricity was provided to the school, but water was still a problem. Premvati spoke to the former Sarpanch of the village who made arrangements for water to be available at school. With the efforts of Premvati and the single women of ASWA, electricity and water were provided at the school -- both of these had been a matter of concern for so many years! Premvati says, “All this was possible with the knowledge and self-confidence that I received from the Association”.

When My Daughter was Declared “Weak Minded” and Rejected Admission to School

“How can somebody declare another person 'weak minded'? When the school teacher said that she could not admit my child in her school because my child was “weak minded”, my dream of educating my daughter, Pooja, was shattered.”

Santosh, of Baran District, Shahabad Block is a “differently-abled” widow. She has been a member of ASWA for some time now. She has a son and a daughter who help her out in running a small grocery shop in their house. When the schools reopened in May-June, Santosh asked her neighbour who was a school teacher to admit her daughter Pooja in the near-by school. The neighbor got Pooja admitted in a private school. The school authorities asked Pooja to bring books, bag, notebooks, etc. When Pooja did not bring the listed items to school, she was mistreated. Santosh was not happy with this situation, and she decided to put Pooja in a Government School. When she went to ask for a TC (transfer certificate) from Pooja's school, the school authorities refused to give it to her.

When Santosh went to the Government School for admission, the teacher there refused to admit Pooja, saying the girl was weak-minded. Hearing this, Santosh was broken. She had never heard anybody say anything like that about her daughter. Therefore, because of this “admission” problem, her daughter did not go to any school.

Santosh participated in the State level special convention for “differently –abled Single Women”. The participants were sharing their problems, and Santosh, shared hers. The other single women ASWA members shared this problem with the team that was working on the “Neev Shiksha Ka Sawal Abhiyan” Campaign of Rajasthan Patrika. Then the Education Campaign team contacted the Education Campaign

members who worked in Baran District, Shahabad Block, and also the local ASWA Block Committee members, and together, they succeeded in getting Pooja an admission in a government school. The school authorities were warned not to trouble Pooja for anything!

The members of ASWA followed up with the school and with Santosh to find out if everything was running smoothly. Since 2015, Pooja is studying in the same school and she has not faced any problems so far. Santosh thanks the women of ASWA and says, “they have saved the future of my child by getting her admitted into a school.”

However Difficult the Struggle Is, I Always Win, Because of My Courage

*“kistmat per rona maine chod diya,
kyon ki apni umeedon ko maine hauslon se
jod diya”*

**“I have stopped crying over my fate,
Because I have matched my expectations
with my courage”**



Life is full of joys and sorrows; every sorrow is followed by a joy, and this is the essence of life. But Maina Bai is one such woman who has had more sorrows than joys! Despite this, Maina Bai never lost hope. Despite the struggles of life, she has fulfilled her childhood dream of being an educated person.

Maina Bai belongs to a small village called Samantpura of Ajmer District, Pisangan Block. Her mother passed away when Maina Bai was very young. Her father remarried and

her stepmother was not good to her. She would make Maina do the daily chores the whole day and would also beat her. She did not send Maina to school. Maina had a deep desire to get educated; when she saw other children going to school, she felt her dream would never come true.

Maina was married at the age of 10. When she was sixteen, she gave birth to a daughter. With all these difficulties, she was running the family well. However, her husband died after being sick with a disease for 2 years. Maina had to accept his death and continue living, and she decided to return to her maternal home. However, her stepmother took a lot of money from an old man who was a drunkard, and got Maina married to him. The drunkard husband would physically abuse Maina everyday.

Due to his addiction to liquor, Maina's second husband died after 7 years. Now Maina was used to bearing sorrow in her life. Her marital family (second one) told her clearly, “we have not given any property to your deceased husband, and everything is in the name of your father-in-law. So, get out of here and never come back! For how long can we keep feeding you?” Cursing her fate, Maina reached her maternal home once again.

Then somebody told her about ASWA. It was like a lifeline for someone who was drowning. One day, Maina went to the ASWA meeting and told all the members her life story, which was full of struggle. All the sisters of the Organization gave her courage and said, “we all are with you”.

After a long struggle, with the help of the Association, Maina got some joy in her life. Although illiterate, she had shown she had courage, and she became a local leader of the Association. One day Maina got to know about the crash-condensed-residential-course in Literacy

organized by ASWA for illiterate single women leaders. She got herself enrolled in this program. Now Maina could see her dream coming true; as a result of the Literacy Course, she got herself educated to the equivalent of class 5 in reading, writing and arithmetic. Her self-confidence increased a lot!

Her daughter got a job in Doosra Dashak, an NGO working on education issues. Now her daughter teaches transgenders. But these people each had different reasons for not coming regularly to the centre to learn. Maina Bai, went around convincing people to attend the classes and get educated. With her efforts, 15 Single Women, and 20 transgenders started coming to the adult learning centre. All of them appeared for the class 8 examinations. They also received certificates that they had passed. Every one was happy.

With her courage and strength, Maina faced the struggles of her life, but she was also an inspiration to others to move forward in life.



4. COMMUNAL HARMONY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

“Humanity is the biggest religion.”

*Your pain - my pain, both are of the same type,
Our relationship is pure, just like The Gita and the Quran....*



*If our sisterhood is strong,
Then, who can divide us?*

Like we all know, hatred is on the rise. This is directly affecting the psyche of all people, irrespective of their caste, religion or income group. People are divided on religious grounds. In this situation, our country is slowly losing its peace, harmony, and social goodwill. The whole identity of our country is based on “Unity in Diversity”. One must not forget that India has set a significant example of social unity, and for years, people of all religions have been living together with love and peace.

Times have changed; there is a widespread hatred all over our country, but the single women of ASWA (Association of Strong Women Alone) all of whom belong to different castes and creeds, live together in unison and are always ready to stand by each other. The sisters of ASWA say, “there is nothing like 'caste or creed', all are human beings here together, and humanity is the highest form of religion. No sect or

religion propagates hatred, malice, hurt, violence, or discrimination. God has created us alike, and we are nobody to discriminate.”

In 20 years of experience, ASWA has seen many cases, where the women of the organization have set an example of sisterhood and proved that humanity is the highest form of religion.

Whenever the sisters of the Association meet,
it feels as if they are giving their message in harmony...

*A day will come, and many pairs of eyes would see,
A day will come, when many tongues would say,
A day will come, when these voices will resonate
A new world is possible
A new world is possible*

*Everybody has the right to live with dignity,
then aren't the She males human too?*

*“ Neither Temple, Mosque, Church or Gurdwara --
Let's make an abode, where Humanity is worshiped,
where mankind is venerated.”*

The sisters of ASWA have been setting the example for years, that respect and dignity is a common right of all. When they see violence or disparity in the distribution of rights, their blood boils with anger! They jump into action to save the victim; no matter whether the victim is a male, female or a transgender; for them, they are all equal. One such incident is given below:

In Baran District, Atru Block, Piplod panchayat during the month of March, after the harvest, several transgender people go around in groups asking for charity. This particular year, a single transgender person had come asking for charity and had collected it from half of the village. When he was going back to his home, at the crossroads there

were about 7-8 rowdy and unruly men who were playing cards. When they saw the transgender person coming their way, they started teasing him and took away all the money he had collected. They started to rip off his clothing. They were abusing him, and other villagers also began to gather there. The transgender person was pleading for help but nobody came forward; they were all mere spectators.

Janaki Bai, Miriam Banu and Kastoori Bai, members of ASWA came to know of this. They asked Rambharosi Bai, Jaganathi Bai and Ramkanya Bai of the Association to join them. All of them went to the place where the transgender person was being tortured. They saved the person from the other men, and questioned the bystanders about their humanity. How could they see such an inhumane thing happening in

front of them? Wasn't the transgender person a human being as well?? Then Miriam Banu informed the police. The police arrived at the spot and chided the men and warned them not to do any such thing in the future. The members of ASWA wanted a more severe action. They insisted on going to the police station and filing a report against those men. The police had no choice but to arrest the offenders, and the others learnt a lesson too.

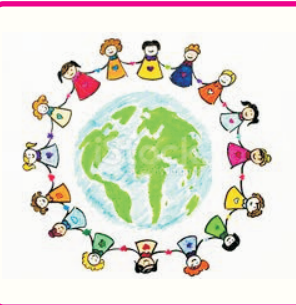


front of them? Wasn't the transgender person a human being as well?? Then Miriam Banu informed the police. The police arrived at the spot and chided the men and warned them not to do any such thing in the future. The members of ASWA wanted a more severe action. They insisted on going to the police station and filing a report against those men. The police had no choice but to arrest the offenders, and the others learnt a lesson too.



The Single Women Celebrate the Jubilation of Sisterhood....

“Sisters, lets tie on each other the thread of protection and celebrate Sisterhood Day (bahina dooj) Lets embrace each other and celebrate Id, breaking all shackles of caste and religion, lets celebrate the bond of sisterhood.



We have always heard people quoting examples of “brotherhood”, and we are expected to cultivate brotherhood amongst ourselves. 20 years ago, 450 women started the journey of the Association of Strong Women Alone, Rajasthan and today it has reached 70,000 single women members. Women of all religions, castes, communities are all together. For the last 2 decades, they have been helping each other. They have no barriers amongst themselves. They have only one relationship – they are all each other's “sisters”.

To celebrate and strengthen this relationship further, the single women started to celebrate a special and novel festival in the year 2016. They called it “bahina dooj jashn ek bahinchare ka” which means “Sisters Day celebrates the feeling of sisterhood with all women”. In this festival, they take a vow to protect each other. They promise each other and take a vow that they would neither be violent nor bear violence, they will be fair to everybody and will never have any sort of discrimination.

In 2016, ASWA started this unique state level festival in Kota, Rajasthan. The next year this was celebrated like a festival in Jhalawar and then Ajmer. Despite being financially weak, single



women came to attend this festival from different Districts at their own expense. Challenging the social malpractice that widows and single women should wear drab clothing, these women dress themselves in colorful clothes and cover their head with a red “Chunri” (long scarf) to participate in this festival. They tie sacred threads around each other's wrists and take an oath to protect and stand by each other in life.



Seeing the significance of this festival, the sisters felt happy and decided to celebrate it every year in different Districts, and strengthen the bond of sisterhood to the extent that their future generations would remember them for their strong relationships with each other. The single women members of ASWA collect donations to organize this festival.

People from every religion, caste, group, and community support the single women with cash and “kind” donations, and offer other assistance too.

When people hear about this festival, some say it is a festival of the Hindus, and some say it's a festival of the Muslims. But the sisters explain that this festival celebrates “Sisterhood” and it is celebrated for love, peace and humanity. They tie the thread on each other's wrists and celebrate “Bahina dooj” and embrace each other in celebration of our common humanity. People feel good about the ideology behind the festival, and appreciate the women of ASWA for their efforts.

Her Muslim Friend Chanda Did the Ritual of “Mayara” for Lakshma Bai.

**Those who try to break us, will themselves break,
But they will not be able to break our sisterhood**

In this world of hatred and division in the name of religion, the single women of ASWA stand with each other for love, peace and humanity. Why do people look at the stories of hatred alone and try to spread more hatred? Why are they not able to see the religion of Humanity to spread love for each other? This religion is woven into all religions. Religion, Community, each does not teach us to have ill feeling for each other. They all give the message of peace, the same as what the women of ASWA are giving.

Chanda Banu, age 45 and a Muslim lost her husband 5 years ago. Lakshma Bai was a poor woman. Her husband was a labourer. Both the women were great friends.

Lakshma Bai's son was to get married on the 7th May. Lakshma did not have any brother, because of which she was very sad. For her son's marriage, there was nobody to do the ritual of “mayara” (brother of the mother of the son or daughter getting married, gifts clothes, jewellery and sweets to the entire family of his sister, signifying his pledge to share the financial burden of the wedding expenditure.). Chanda Banu could not see her friend so sad. She told her, “I am alive now and we are everything for each other. I will perform the ritual of mayara for your son's marriage.” From Tonk, she got a beautiful chunri and gave



Lakshma Bai a mayara of Rs. 10,000. She was like a true sibling for Lakshma Bai and for the entire family. Whoever saw this could not believe what they saw.... and said, relationships should not be based on caste or religion, they should be based on humanity - just like Chanda Banu and Lakshma Bai.

Jamna Bai Waged a War Against the Caste System.....

Jamna Bai says, "If possible, try to unite the hearts, forget the bond of caste, if you can, show love, erase hatred from each heart, and live with each other in harmony....."

Jamna Bai of Nagaur District belongs to a "scheduled caste". It was her third year as a member of ASWA. She was responsible for helping several single women solve their problems. She had bravely confronted people, who exploited others on the basis of caste.

The state government had brought out an order that the government schools should give Single Women the priority for making the evening snack of "ghugni" (black gram, dried yellow or white peas, soaked boiled and sautéed with other condiments).

On that basis, Jamna Bai got a job at a school in her village, Chavli, to make ghugni for the children. Many children from the Jat families were studying in that school. The parents prohibited their children to eat the ghugni made by Jamna Bai because she was from a "scheduled caste". Then the parents complained to the Sarpanch, (the President of the Village Council) and the Sarpanch supported them and was against Jamna



Bai. Arrangements were being made to dismiss Jamna Bai. She complained to the District Collector, but even he did not help her.

Jamna Bai attended the State level meeting of ASWA at Jaipur. At that time, there was an educational tour for the state level committee members. All the leaders of the ASWA went to the office of the "The Hunger Project". They met the Head of the Project, Aparna Sahay there, and Jamna Bai handed over to her a letter complaining about the move to dismiss her from her job as a cook in the school, because of being a member of a scheduled caste. Aparna Sahay wrote a letter to the Delhi Panchayati Raj Department, and a copy of the letter was forwarded to the District Collector and it created a flutter. The Sarpanch immediately went to Jamna Bai and apologized. But Jamna Bai refused to accept his apology, and said that the court would decide the punishment for the guilty. There is a Scheduled Caste Atrocity Act. The Sarpanch and other associated members had to face the proceedings of the court and Jamna Bai got back her job of making ghugni at the school.

The case had further repercussions. The Patwari (government revenue clerk) who was refusing to sign the sanction letters for the pension forms submitted by the members of ASWA, signed them immediately! The presence and significance of ASWA and Jamna Bai was quite strong in the village, and in the adjoining villages as well. Six other scheduled caste women got the job of making ghugni in different schools. Another repercussion -- the villagers have stopped exploiting the Dalits of the village! This is probably out of fear of ASWA members who are now aware of their rights, rather than a change of heart about scheduled caste persons!

Jamna Bai says, "I am uneducated, but the amount of courage and strength I got from ASWA has helped me to fight against this huge problem of the Caste System."

Break the shackles of the caste system, and join the hearts with love.

The Members of ASWA Became Family for Vera, from Kazakhstan

The members of the organization do not hesitate to help others, irrespective of whether the person in need is their fellow villager or somebody from another country.

This is an incident from the city of Kota in 2019, wherein Vera, a Christian woman from Kazakhstan, and an engineer by training, required help. A doctor from Kota had gone to Kazakhstan to pursue a medical course. Vera met him there, and they fell in love. Vera came to India along with him and they got married in India. Vera was finding it very difficult to adapt to Indian culture. The couple started to have lots of problems in their relationship. After a point, her doctor husband started to torture her. Vera was finding it difficult to buy the formula milk for her one-year old baby since she could not afford it and her husband had stopped buying it for their baby. Vera went to the police station several times, but her husband was clever and he knew various methods to tackle the police officers. Vera was a foreigner, so people trusted him more than her. Her situation was pathetic.



In March, Vera got the phone number of the ASWA office in Kota from somebody, and she contacted the organization. She told the leaders about her troubles in detail. Immediately, 4-5 members of the organization met the Superintendent of Police of Kota. He sent some policemen with ASWA members to Vera's apartment. The visit to her apartment confirmed her pathetic condition. The single women and the police heard all that Vera had to say. They got the formula milk and other essentials for Vera and her baby. They asked Vera to write an application

to the organization. But Vera was not ready to File an FIR with the police, because if her husband went to the jail, there would be nobody to provide for her and her baby.

Vera said, "My husband has not made any government identification documents for me. She had her marriage certificate, but that was all. "He wanted me to return to my country and I don't want to go back. I want the birth certificate for my child's birth. My visa is about to expire; I want that to be renewed. I want to live with my child." The sisters of ASWA collected Rs. 1,700 and helped her make some of her government documents and bought her some essentials for the home.

Her husband was giving her some medicines that were causing her into sink into depression. The members of ASWA took Vera to a Government Psychiatrist for consultation. All her medicines were stopped and she was put on one single tablet.

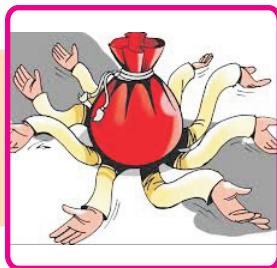
The members of ASWA run the Women's Security and Counseling Centre (MSSK) in Kota, which is housed in the Women's Police Station. Her husband was called there and he was counseled. He was asked to pay her an amount of Rs 20,000 every month, provide her with accommodation and get all her government documents ready at the earliest.

Finally , after four months of the efforts of the organization and Women's Security and Counseling Centre counselors, Vera is with her baby and very happy. Her self-confidence has also increased and she has got all her government documents ready. She is also receiving the monthly support from her husband for her child. Vera says," I was of the opinion that the people of this country were very bad, but after I met the single women of ASWA my opinion has completely changed. These women are "family" to me."



5. AGAINST CORRUPTION

***Malpractioners Beware!
The Women of the Association Will Not
Tolerate Corruption***



“Corruption” means “Illegal Behaviour” and we are all well aware of this. Corruption has put down strong roots in our country, and dealing with it is a big challenge today. Day after day, it is spreading like an epidemic disease. No department or division is untouched by corruption. Today, right from the watchman to the highest officer, to political leaders, corruption is widely practiced.

The corrupt are eating our country like termites and making it really hollow. Corruption has many colours like, bribery, black market, overpricing of goods, increasing the price on purpose, adulteration of goods, seeking money and personal benefits for doing one's own assigned work.

We see these kinds of things happening in our everyday life. These days, the overall atmosphere makes us think that things will happen only when we offer a bribe. People have started offering bribes so easily, and yet it is totally wrong. It is totally wrong to demand or accept a bribe, but it is equally wrong to give a bribe. Instead of bringing a corrupt system to an end, we are only encouraging it. We should raise our voices against the corrupt system. People only talk against corruption, but very few people stand against corruption. In this scenario, single women, who are

considered weak and helpless, raised their voices against black marketeering and bribery. Come, let's get to know from these brave and powerful women, their stories against corruption.

Black Market of Red Blood – the Attack by the Organization

Somathi Bai tells – for human beings, doctors are like God's on earth. When these doctors turn from protector to destroyer, will we still give them the pedestal of “God”? The women of the Association of Strong Women Alone brought a medical case to light in front of the media and the society.



On the 18th of May, in the Block Committee meeting of Hindaun Block of Karauli District, the ASWA women present reported about a problem they had uncovered in the Rajgirish Hospital situated in the Block. Children, women and others were *forced to donate blood* and were being pushed towards untimely deaths. The single women members added that the children of the single women were also not spared. In one voice they said that they wanted to stand against this practice. An investigation committee of 4-5 of the women was formed immediately, to go and inspect the Rajgirish Hospital and other private and government hospitals.

The single women members reported in the next meeting that Rajgirish Hospital and one other hospital were illegally carrying on this business of black marketing blood, and also were conducting sex determination tests on pregnant women, which is also illegal. What was

to happen next? The women of the organization, fuming with anger, organized a rally on the very same day at Hindaun and demanded action against the offenders. They compiled a memorandum and handed it over to the SDM. Other ASWA members and other women's groups also participated in this rally.

Members of the organization challenged the administration that if they did not arrest the offending doctors within 3 days, they would bring out a bigger rally with 28,000 women! After the rally, the District Collector, Niraj K. Pawan, came to the police station and took reports of the action taken by the police against the racket of the blood black marketers.

After giving the memorandum to the SDM, the women decided that they would all meet a week later, and would visit private and government hospitals and inspect them for illegal practices. The patients across different hospitals were asked about the facilities and services offered to them, the costs involved, and whether treatment and tests were done in a transparent way. This campaign continued for 3 months, with the end result that the police and administration had to close down 2 hospitals. They started their legal proceedings against the offenders, and the government administrators agreed that the single women members of the Association of Strong Women Alone were a powerful presence against corruption and were successful in pressing for actions that would bring justice.

Munni Bai , a member of the Hindaun Block Committee tells -- when they first raised their voices about the corruption they had uncovered, everybody said, “nothing will change; all these things have been happening for years. What will you do? These medical people have very good hold of things and are 'well-connected' “. Munni Bai says, we told them “different situations are either right or wrong, legal or illegal, honest or dishonest, and if we find that what is going on is wrong, we will not tolerate corruption...”

Single Women Raise Their Voices and Stop the Corruption by Postmen

Sometimes , for our small or large benefits, we don't mind enduring injustice, victimization and/or oppression. That is why we don't raise our voices because we think if we do so, we would be the loser. But looking closely, by remaining quiet against corruption, we would even be letting others endure injustice, crime, and oppression. Instead, if we raise our voice against corruption, we would be saving many people from corruption. That is why Moran Kuor from the organization says, “don't be afraid to raise your voice against corruption”.



Moran Kuor, a resident of District Rajsamand , is a member of her Block Committee. Her problem was, whenever the postman brought her pension, he wanted Rs. 20 from her! He was doing the same thing with the other women of the village. Moran Kuor is a poor woman. With Rs. 500 pension, she barely is able to make her ends meet, besides fulfilling the bribery demand of the postman. Being a member of the Association, she brought up this matter in the Block Committee meeting. The Committee members showed her a copy of *Ekal Nari ki Awaaz*, the newsletter of ASWA, “The Voice of Single Women”, and told her to ask the postman to give it in writing that he wanted Rs. 20.

Moran Kuor came home with the copy of the *Ekal Nari ki Awaz*. This time when the postman brought the pension, Moran Kuor took the pension from the postman. When the postman demanded for his bribe, Moran Kuor handed him the copy of *Ekal Nari ki Awaz* and asked him to give her in writing that he wanted Rs 20 in return. The postman read the

newspaper and left without taking any money. Moran Kuor was very happy; for her this was like a miracle. Now Moran Kuor was free of this trouble.

She told about this incident to 25 other women. All the women in the meeting wanted a copy of the *Ekal Nari ki Awaaz* and said they would show it to their postmen. All the women who were receiving a pension gave a copy of *Ekal Nari ki Awaaz* to their postman. No postman could put in writing his demand for a bribe. Now the postman does not demand money from anybody in exchange for handing over their pension.

This way Moran Kuor's effort helped the entire village to free themselves from the greedy clutches of the postmen. Everybody agreed that with the efforts of Moran Kuor, single women's and other pensioner's money was saved.

A Doctor Asking for a Bribe was Brought Under the Scanner **Is he a doctor or a dacaoit?**

Kachri Bai of Bijori panchayat, Kushalgarh Block, Banswara District says “is he a doctor or a dacaoit? Don't they have enough salary to take care of their needs – why do they need to suck the blood of the poor?....”

“Dr Pawan Sharma of the Banswara government hospital, a gynecologist, is well-known for taking bribes, but nobody was ready to stand against him. On 12th October, when my daughter-in-law was in the hospital for her delivery, I was with



her. On the 14th, when my daughter-in-law had delivered her baby, the doctor wanted me to pay him Rs. 4,000. We told him that we had only

Rs. 1,000 with us, and we will send somebody home and get the balance money and pay him. Then I inquired from the other women in the ward, if they had also paid the doctor. All of them replied in the affirmation and added that these days, no work happens without money. I said to them, 'let's all join together and lodge a complaint against the doctor', but none of them agreed to this.”

“Then on the 14th one man came, for his wife's delivery. After his wife delivered, the doctor asked him too to pay Rs 4,000. He was clever; he spoke to his brother who was working as a compounder elsewhere, and told him everything. The brother advised him to pay Rs 1,000 for now and told him that he (the brother) would reach there with the police. Then I spoke to that man and told him that I was with him. We will complain about the doctor together. He asked me to talk to the rest of the patients who had paid the doctor, and motivate them to be witnesses. Then I spoke to 2-3 patients and we caught the doctor red-handed when they were paying the doctor the remaining Rs. 3,000. We got him arrested. All of us gave our consent to the Anti-Corruption Police (ACP) to be witnesses in court to the act of bribery of the doctor. Based on our complaint, Dr. Pawan Sharma was imprisoned.”

All the patients in the hospital praised Kachri Bai and said if all the women of the village become so smart then there would be no more corruption. Kachri Bai is a fearless woman and she has proved that single woman cannot only help themselves or other single women, but they can solve the problems of the society. They bring to light the varied problems in our society and they also raise their voice against them.

Stopped the Brokerage Happening on “E-Mitra”– Money Refunded

Corruption is on the Rise Every Day, and the Poor are Having the Life Squeezed Out of Them

In Kherabad Block , Kumbhkot panchayat in Kota District, there was a problem in the E-Mitra operator releasing the E-Mitra pensions allotted to the single women. The person in charge was giving the pension every alternate month. In the process, he was pocketing Rs. 1,000 from each woman.

In the meeting of the Kumbhkot panchayat, the single women raised the problem that they were not receiving their pensions every month. Reshma Banu checked everyone's pension diary and noticed that there was an entry of the pension on every alternate month. She realized there was something fishy going on. The members and other single women telephoned the E–Mitra official. His name was Gopal. When he was questioned, he very arrogantly replied that he could pay only what he receives and cannot pay from his pocket. The women threatened him that they were going to lodge a complaint against him. He panicked and rushed to the meeting of the Association, and returned Rs. 1,000 to each of 3 of the members who were present there. He promised to return the money of the other women as well. He asked for forgiveness and requested us not to lodge any complaint. “I will return all your money” he said.

All the ASWA single women were happy and are receiving their



pension every month without any hassle. Because of the resistance shown by the organization, all pensioners are receiving their full pension on time. The efforts of the organization have been beneficial to the entire village. Everybody thanked the members of the Association of Strong Women Alone.

Black Market Corruption Landed the Ration Shop Dealer in Jail

Single Woman Taught a Lesson to the Ration Shop Dealer – They Raised Their Voices Against Corruption

We all know that the ration dealers do not give us the ration food items or kerosene on time. This means that the dealer is curbing the rights of the poor and selling “their food items and kerosene” on the black market. But if the single women are strong, these malpractices cannot continue. This is a successful story from the Brahmchari area in the city of Alwar.

Sheela Mugdal, member of the State Level Committee of Alwar, (who has since passed away), gave us this in a Committee meeting a few years ago. In Brahmchari Colony, there was a ration shop dealer near the movie hall. The dealer would distribute kerosene only to a few people who came to his shop and would turn the others away, telling them he had received only a limited stock. He would ask them to come the following month. He told them he was always receiving only a small amount of kerosene. People would go back sad and disappointed. The same dealer



would sell the kerosene drums at night at a higher price. Everyone was troubled by this but were afraid to raise their voices against this powerful dealer.

One day, 2 of the members of the Association of Strong Women Alone brought forward this complaint in the Block Committee meeting in Umrain. The sisters of the organization told the SDO about this black marketing of government kerosene for the ration shop. The SDO asked them to keep a watch on the dealer and inform him when he indulged in black marketing. The officer promised to reach the spot immediately, since this was a case of his District's jurisdiction.

The members of the organization kept a constant watch on the ration shop dealer and informed the SDO when they saw the dealer selling the kerosene on the black market. The dealer was caught red-handed, and he was imprisoned and his dealership was cancelled.

The members of the organization requested the SDO to allow the son of one of their members to run the ration shop thereafter. They promised him that he would run the shop with utmost honesty. The SDO agreed to this and gave the responsibility of running the ration shop to the son of a single woman member of ASWA. The SDO also praised the awareness and courage of the single women and told them they showed "guts" and grit. The women had done something, which the men could not do.



6. BREAKING CRUEL CUSTOMS

*We sisters come here breaking all chains lose....
There is a possibility of a new world!*

*For centuries I am loaded with a burden;
I have been tied down under the name of
Culture.*



*We are single women,
We do not break down or bow down
amidst struggles and heartbreaks of life.*

*We face them strongly;
We are single but we are not weak. Until when would we keep holding
onto the traditions
and the wrong rituals of society....?*

Widows and single women are an integral part of our society. Women, who have lost their husband, or are separated for some reason, living with their in-laws, or parents, or living alone, are forced to lead a solitary life. Though living with family, single women are often neglected. And even if they are taken care of, it's only out of mercy and pity. Single women are not considered as a respected member or citizen of society.

A single woman of the family, faces struggles and difficulties, but despite that, she fulfills all her responsibilities. There are a few rules of our society, which are made only for Widows and Single Women. Society has been handing over these norms from one generation to another as a gift or inheritance. Our society is carrying this burden without any thought or understanding.

In comparison to other single women of the society, a widow is strongly thought to be a bad omen! It is believed that her presence on happy occasions like marriage, childbirth, etc can bring some kind of ill omen to the occasion or to the lives of the married couple or the new baby. The widow in the family is used to working hard to keep the family together, tending to the health and education of children and making them good citizens. As soon as there is some auspicious occasion, the same woman is left behind because her presence would bring some kind of obstacle to the happy occasion.

All these rituals are attached to widows and not to widowers, because most widowers re-marry. That is why the number of widowers in our country is much less in comparison to the widows. All the cutting or cruel rules and rituals are for the women of the society.

The government, administration and the society at large make huge claims about the empowerment of women. But even today, women are in a secondary position in relation to men. For years, women have been facing gender discrimination in some form or another.

When the Association of Strong Women Alone (ASWA) was started in November 1999, the social and cultural position of the single women was pitiable. They had a lot of restrictions on food, clothing, moving outside the home, dressing up, being a part of any happy occasion, or re-marriage. In the year 1999, 450 Single women got together and announced the beginning of their organization. They took an oath that they would live the life of free and respected citizens, and they would have equal rights.

Slowly their numbers increased, and they started breaking away from the restrictions of society. The organization (ASWA), which began with 450 members, has 70,000 single women today. The organization members have broken many caste and community customs associated with single women and have attacked other bad practices of the society. We are now sharing a few of those success stories.

Wearing Colourful Clothes – the Trunk of Colourful Sarees

Widows are supposed to look plain, unattractive, and as such, they are not supposed to wear colourful clothes, wear bangles, put a “bindi” dot on their forehead, or in any way look “attractive”. In January 2000, two months after the Bassi Convention, the follow-up committee meeting of widows selected for this committee was held. One woman, looking beautiful in a bright green saree, informed the meeting that after the Convention, she had gone home, gotten out her tin trunk with her colourful sarees from early in her marriage, when her husband was alive, and started wearing the sarees! The Convention had inspired her to live free from cruel customs which made her look, and feel, drab.

The organizers of the Widow Convention (November 1999) had thought that changing cruel customs and traditions would mean that the women would have to find liberal-thinking elders in the caste organizations, or a progressive youth wing, and get their help to slowly change such oppressive customs. But no – once the widows felt the support for change from the other widows, they just went ahead and began changing their lives to make them better! Two months! They were “single” but not “alone”! Breaking cruel caste and community customs, not waiting to slowly convince their society that change is necessary, bit by bit. These women are wonderful revolutionaries!

The Attack of ASWA on the Ritual of “Nata” or “Common Law Relationship”

It's the custom of our society that a woman can get married only once. Remarriage is accepted by law, but hardly any woman dares to go against the customary rules of society to get married for a second time. Some communities have the option of “Nata Pratha”, a kind of “common-

law relationship". If a family or the woman herself wants to marry another man, then according to the rules of the caste elders (Jaati Panches), she can have a Nata Relationship. But there are problems for the woman and her children in Nata. The woman in a Nata relationship has no legal rights or protection. One woman can have a repeated number of Natas. The first husband demands money from her "second husband". The woman and her children get nothing and often their situation is quite bad.

Annu Rathod of Antha Block, Baran District was married at the age of 18, and at the age of 22, she gave birth to a boy baby, and she became a widow when her son was one year old. She had lost her mother before she got married and her father passed away after her marriage. That is why she started living with one male acquaintance / friend along with her son.



She was always insecure – if her male friend asked her to leave his place, where would she go? Many well-wishers kept suggesting to her to go into a Nata relationship, as leading a life all alone would be very difficult for her. But Annu did not want to have any Nata agreement. She wanted to have another life partner of her own choice. In the house of her male acquaintance, a young unmarried man, Hemraj, was a frequent visitor and he developed a liking for Annu. When Hemraj proposed marriage to Annu, Annu accepted the proposal. Hemraj and Annu signed an agreement of marriage on plain paper, and they started living together.

Hemraj's family was not happy with his "marriage". They told Hemraj that they would disown him and dis-inherit him from family land and property if he did not leave Annu. Hemraj agreed to leave Annu.

Annu was horrified and she could literally feel the earth slipping away under her feet. Annu wanted a solution to this problem. Her neighbour gave her the information about the Association of Strong Women Alone (ASWA). Annu narrated everything to the members of ASWA and showed them the marriage paper. And she came to know that Hemraj was fooling her and her marriage was not legal. All the members of ASWA assured Annu that they would help her in conducting her marriage with Hemraj.

At the district conference of ASWA, the stage was decorated and ready for the marriage ceremony; the women sang songs. When Hemraj was called there, he panicked and refused to marry. The women of ASWA tried to make him understand that his marriage to Annu which was done by them writing on plain paper, was not a valid marriage! They did not have any marriage certificate. Finally, Hemraj agreed and the women of ASWA got Annu and Hemraj married with all the customs and rituals along with the legal formalities. On the affidavit it was mentioned that Hemraj would accept Annu's son as his own son and fulfill all the responsibilities of a father.

This marriage was appreciated by all - the lawyer, the temple priest, media, news channels, the members of ASWA. Everybody agreed in unison that this was the right thing that was done. This marriage is a strong attack on the custom of 'Nata Pratha'

*If you wish to succeed, then break cruel customs and move forward,
Else the living of your entire life obeying these customs
Would suffocate you to death behind the Burka or the Veil*

“Remarriage of a Widow is a Sin – How Can a Widow Remarry?”

The members of the Association of Strong Women Alone (ASWA) played the role of “family” and broke the regressive tradition of not letting a widow remarry. Beena Saini, aged 32, is a resident of Bundi District, Hindauli Block. She is a very strong member of ASWA. She was very young when her husband died, and it was with great difficulty that Beena brought up her two children. Her brother and sister-in-law were giving her constant trouble. Beena's family was ASWA. Beena was a widow at a very early age, and she wanted to remarry. But the society in which she lived had a strong objection to widow remarriage. It's a social belief that widow remarriage was a sin.

Beena had gone through a lot of hardships in life and she had brought up her children well. Then Beena started to have “a soft corner” for a man called Manish Saini, who was single and a few years younger to Beena. He also had a liking for Beena. He was ready to accept her children as his own. But her family and society did not agree to this. When Beena told her family that she wanted to marry Manish, she was sent away from her home. She was accused of having a destiny which did not have any marital bliss. They told her that if she wanted to remarry, she would make her family a laughing stock of the community.

Then Beena moved to Manish's rented home. There was a lot of foul talk about Beena and Manish. It was difficult for Beena even to leave the house because of what people were saying.

Beena explained everything to the members of the Block Committee of ASWA, and they came out with a solution: the members of ASWA would be the family members of Beena, and they would organize the widow's remarriage. All the local members of ASWA pooled in money and got Beena married. The women of ASWA, many media persons and a few policemen attended the marriage. The ASWA made all arrangements for a traditional marriage ceremony; they had a party and

they distributed sweets (ladoos!) too. The next day, the entire Rajasthan was buzzing with this news. Beena's family members and the society were in shock. Later on, the ASWA leaders talked with the families of Beena and Manish, and told them that times were changing. What they had done in marrying was legal, and they hoped the families would accept their marriage. Both of the families did accept this marriage, which made Beena and Manish very happy. Everybody else praised this marriage a lot and said that this was bound to happen. Beena's father gave Beena her share of his land.

After this, in the same community, many widow remarriages were conducted. This effort of ASWA helped in changing the “thinking” of society a great deal. The Association members said, “what is the use of such customs, which make one's life equivalent to death. There should be change.”

Now Beena is very happy with both her children and other family members.

Beena says,

“Be the change; only then the world will change with you.”



Gosh !!!! Can A Widow Dance in Front of the Bride in a Rajput Marriage?

***Member of ASWA, Pushpa Kanwar says,
“Traditions are for the happiness of life,
and not to end the life”***



Pushpa Kuor Ranawat belonged to the Rajput clan of Chittorgarh. The Rajputs were patriarchs and orthodox, their women did not step out of the house without having a veil on their heads. 45 year old Pushpa also had similar thinking and standards for Rajput woman since she grew up in such an environment. She gave significance to all the traditions and customs of the society – good or bad. Her mother's orthodox thoughts restricted Pushpa from continuing her education after class 8. Her mother believed that if the girl child was well educated, finding a suitable groom for her would be difficult. But her brother was educated, a university graduate. Being a girl child, Pushpa had several restrictions on her actions, speech, food, clothing, etc. from childhood.

Pushpa Kuor was married to Abhay Singh at the age of 15. She had her first son at the age of 18 and her second son 7 years later. Her marital life was good, but in 2005 her husband passed away due to cancer. She and her family were living in Chanderia, near Chittor, for 30 years and her husband died in Chanderia. Her in-laws' family wanted to do the last rites of her husband 5 kilometres away from Chanderia. Pushpa Kanwar did not agree to this and she resisted. Ultimately, she had the last rites of her husband done at Chanderia. Being a Rajput widow, her life had become very difficult. But Pushpa Kuor said –“it was necessary for me to be alive to take care of my children”.

A relative told Pushpa Kuor about the Association of Strong Women Alone (ASWA) in Udaipur. She joined ASWA, and shared her miseries with the sisters of the Association. She got a lot of courage, hope and happiness after meeting the members of ASWA. After joining the organization, Pushpa Kuor's thinking, living, and dressing sense changed. Several single women from Rajput culture joined the organization through her encouragement, and she brought many changes in them as well.

When her sons reached the marital age, Pushpa Kuor, who was already liberated from the chains of usual Rajput social norms, announced that, despite being a widow, she would perform and participate in all the auspicious ceremonies of the marriage! Hearing this, everybody was stunned; this decision was not so easy. But she had made-up her mind to break the old customs of society that excluded and controlled women, and she decided to pioneer this.

There was nothing that could stop her. The family members gave up and Pushpa Kuor performed all the auspicious ceremonies at her son's marriage. There was a tradition wherein the women were neither to dance in front of the bride nor allowed to decorate the horse for the groom. When her sons sat on their horses, she took a step forward to decorate the horse. All eyebrows were raised against her and they started whispering to each other, “doesn't she care for the wellbeing of her sons?”. Somebody else commented, “look at her, she is all decked up and even wearing a shimmering bindi on her forehead”. They were doing all this on purpose to pull her down and keep her (a widow) in their control. But she retorted, “whoever has a problem with my participation in the ceremonies, may leave”. Then she decorated the horse and did Ganesh Pooja. Doing so, she gave a befitting reply to the excluding custom of society associated with widows. Pushpa Kuor said that the credit of bringing in a great change to her personality goes to ASWA. It has changed the basis of her thinking, from being orthodox to becoming progressive. As a result of her leadership, several changes came in the

women of the Rajput Clans of this region.

The members of ASWA, who are the agents for change of the cruel orthodox customs of the society, give befitting replies to the protectors of these cruel traditions of society.

As we know, it is not easy, individually, to break the regressive traditions of society. Collectively, they can and are doing so!

Due to their actions, sometimes they are out-casted from their society. If we wish for social change, or try to end or challenge any old wrong practices of the society, the protectors of the society are the first to object. They try to ensure that the customs and traditions are kept intact even if these are painful and cruel. In this scenario, the members of ASWA have taken an oath to end cruel customary beliefs, and they remain unstoppable!

Nandu Bai is a widow and an old member of ASWA, lives in Kota District. She invited all the local members of ASWA to attend her daughter's marriage at a group marriage ceremony. The marriage was to be conducted in accordance to the customs of the Maali Samaj of Dehit Panchayat. The sisters were very happy, and enquired if Nandu Bai would be performing and participating in all the auspicious rituals of the marriage. With a sad voice, Nandu Bai replied "the marriage is going to be a mass marriage of our caste and community, and many people would be present there. How would I be able to do all these things? Everybody will make me an outcast and my daughter's marriage would be called off!"

The members of ASWA then came up with a solution: "if we have to change the outlook of the society, then we will have to go amongst the protectors of the society." Then all the single women members went shopping for a chunari (bride's veil, long piece of decorated cloth) and other adornments for Nandu Bai's daughter's wedding.

Around 20 women of ASWA reached the community hall where the mass marriage was to take place on the 3rd of May. They met the Managing Secretary to the Head of the function, and introduced themselves and ASWA. They expressed that they wanted to adorn the bride with the chunari, bangles and Mehendi (henna) in the presence of the whole community. They requested him to let them come onto the stage and allow them to do all these things. After a lot of explanation, the Head gave them the permission.

There was a huge crowd in the community hall, around 10,000 to 12,000 people were present – all relatives and friends of the many couples getting married on the same day. At about 4 pm that day, there was an announcement asking everybody to assemble at the Pandal (tent near the stage). The members of the ASWA explained about the difficulties arising in the lives of single women by adhering to the age-old restrictions and norms of the society. They asked the crowd present there to help the single women in breaking away from these shackles of the society. Initially there were arguments, but after the sisters of ASWA explained and in the presence of the media, the Head said that these women are doing excellent work and we should support them.

All the sisters of ASWA adorned Nandu Bai's daughter for the marriage and Nandu Bai participated and performed all the rituals. On the insistence of the Head, 8 other widows also adorned their children for the marriage and took part in all the auspicious rituals of the marriages. The public appreciated this effort of the single women members of ASWA. The message that the sisters sent forward to thousand's of people is:



*A woman never loses, she is made to lose
"What will the society say?" She is threatened with this fear.*

7. WITCH HUNTING

A War Between the Association (ASWA) and the Superstition of “Witches”

“ Why are only Women accused of being a Witch? Especially Dalit, Tribal and Single Women.”

What actually is associated with the superstition about Witches?



Even after 70 years of Independence, and in the 21st century, many states, towns, villages, cities have several superstitious beliefs. One of the beliefs is about the cure for different types of illness in children (physical or mental), or diseases in animals and other livestock by *tantra mantra* and *jharaad phoonk*, uttering spiritual sayings or brushing away evil spirits with a bunch of peacock feathers!

Believing in the presence of a ghost, or evil spirit in a human being, and “treating” or exorcizing that person with inhuman torture is still practiced in a big way in some places. The tantriks¹ are performing these practices openly. Of all the superstitions and ill practices of social traditions in Rajasthan, the most common and hurtful to women is “*Dayan* or the *Daakan Pratha*” – accusing a woman of being a Witch. The woman considered as a witch is tortured by different means. Her human rights are suspended in the interest of the community; very often she is driven from her home, and sometimes she is even killed!

¹ “tantric” – “spiritual quack healer”, “Black Magic” practitioner

Most of the cases of *Dayan* or the *Daakan Pratha*, that have come to light in Rajasthan are of a widow, dalit or tribal woman. Dalit women are considered inferior, and so also are the widows. In the village, if some child or animal is unwell, or if the cows are not giving milk, then the entire blame is on the widow. Her family members or other powerful people make use of the situation and try to chase her out of the village and grab all her land / property. She is considered as a Witch. Her land and property are seized from her.

Social organizations, women and victims have raised their voices against these increasing incidents; they have started to protest against these practices. The Rajasthan Government has passed The Rajasthan Prevention of Witch Hunting Act 2015.” (*Rajasthan Dayan Pratandna Nivaran Adhiniyam 2015*”). But no significant results have come up as a result of the Act, because the administration is insensitive and there is a lack of awareness about this relatively new Act.

For the last 19 years, The Association of Strong Women Alone (ASWA) in Rajasthan is reaching out to all poor widows and single women, helping them to find a solution for their problems. ASWA has looked into several issues, of which the issue of “Witches” is of special concern. In specific Districts like Banswara, Udaipur, Dungarpur, Bhilwara, Pratapgarh and Chittorgarh, incidents related to the superstitious belief about witches are very popular, specially with Single Women. These Districts are “the tribal belt” of Rajasthan. Though there is a law against these “witch” beliefs, the incidents are dealt with socially, not legally. The law has punished nobody until now. But after the law was made, there has begun to be some slow changes in society, because people fear the law.

The women of ASWA have helped many women to get some justice for superstitious actions inflicted upon them, even before the law was passed. Of the various cases, brought to the organization, the common

factors amongst them were -- the victim was a widow and there was greed for the land or property.

Come, let's see how these women fought their battles: a few experiences of these women are now shared.

When No Other Reason was Found to Grab Her Land, She was Declared "A Witch"

Dhanu Bai, an ASWA member, says, "when a woman becomes a Witch after her husband's death, then doesn't the man turn into something after his wife's death ...?"

Dhanu Bai Meena, a resident of Udaipur District, village Dhankavada, Sarada Block, tells us that her father-in-law had 4 sons, of which 3 of them died. Dhanu Bai's husband also was one of the 3 deceased. Only her elder brother-in-law, Mogaram, was alive.



With the intention of forcing Dhanu Bai to leave the house, Mogaram would abuse Dhanu Bai verbally and physically. When nothing worked, he conspired against her and declared that Dhanu Bai was a Witch. The panchayat of the village was called to make a just decision about whether Dhanu Bai was a Witch or not, but Mogaram bribed and threatened them to get the decision in his favour. Dhanu Bai filed a police complaint, but due to lack of witnesses, the case could not be taken further!

Dhanu Bai was disappointed, and she went to her maternal home with her children. She worked hard to survive. One day, she met Mangli Bai of her village. Mangli Bai was attached to the Association of Strong

Women Alone (ASWA). She asked Dhanu Bai to attend the Association meeting. In the meeting of ASWA, Dhanu Bai narrated her miserable condition. The members immediately decided to hold the next meeting at Dhanu Bai's in-law's village – Dhankavada. Some of the women were scared of her brother-in-law and said, "what can we do...these decisions have to be made by the Sarpanch."

But other members of ASWA, spoke and convinced everybody; they encouraged them and when everyone gave their consent, they decided to have a meeting in 3 weeks time at Dhakanvada. Members of ASWA, Somi Bai and Jamna Bai ensured the presence of Atli Bai - the village Sarpanch, and also, Dhanu Bai's maternal family and in-laws for the meeting.

Mogaram then began to threaten ASWA members and Dhanu Bai. He refused to attend the meeting held at the school.

Three months later, some ASWA leaders of the region also came for a second meeting. Mogaram was threatened by the police to attend the meeting. They told him, and his associates, that he could be punished if they continued calling Dhanu Bai a Witch. The meeting lasted until late in the night. Everybody told Mogaram, there was no point in prolonging the issue.

The next day, leaders of ASWA, members of the panchayat, and others drafted a letter of compromise. It was mentioned in the letter, (1) nobody would call Dhanu Bai a Witch, and (2) her house and property would be returned to her. Now Dhanu Bai is living in her house in her marital village and is farming her land. She also helps other single women. Now she has become quite strong.

Why Is Hakri Bai Held Responsible If Anybody Is Sick in the Village?

Hakri Bai asks: “is it a curse to be a widow? Is there no respect for a poor widow? I can never forget, how the villagers declared me a Witch and had cow dung rubbed on me....”

Hakri Bai, is a tribal of the Meena caste who lives in Solna village, Jhadol Block, Udaipur District. After the death of her husband, she was leading a lonely life. When she became a widow, the villagers started calling her a “Witch” and for any unfortunate thing that happened in the village, Hakri Bai was held responsible for it.



Hakri Bai was bothered by the taunts and accusations of the villagers. One day, a few people rubbed cow dung on her face. Hakri Bai locked herself in the house for a few days. She was finding it difficult to run her household. She then went to the Association of Strong Women Alone (ASWA) and with their assistance she went to the police station. On the insistence of the ASWA, the police “bound down” the unsocial elements and made the villagers understand that there was no such thing as Witches. After that, Hakri Bai lived a peaceful life. And she is now helping other single and needy women in solving their problems.

From Now On, the Villagers Will Not Call Anybody a Witch...

Batki Bai says, “it's a sin to exploit others, but it's a bigger sin to be exploited and do nothing about it”

Batki Bai age 48, a resident of Udaipur District, Girwa Block, Kaya Village was called a witch, because a one year old girl passed away. The villagers decided bury the baby in Batki Bai's house. When Batki Bai

objected, she was beaten up and “excommunicated” or boycotted by the community.

After this, when Batki Bai filed an FIR at the police station, the police also did not handle the matter seriously. Batki Bai has been associated with ASWA for several years, and the organization tried really hard to make the policemen file an FIR for being called a Witch. This time the police took necessary action, and got the name-callers arrested. After this incident, nobody in the village accuses anybody of being a “Witch.” Batki's effort has helped the entire village and the malpractice of calling a woman a Witch is now gone forever.

“When Tarnishing my Character Did Not Work for Them, I Was Called a 'Witch.'...” Kesar Bai.

After the death of Tulsiram of Pratapgarh District, Kesar Bai, his widow, was engulfed with difficulties from all sides. Her brothers-in-law and sister-in-law tried hard to encroach her property, but were unsuccessful. They resorted to threatening Kesar Bai, and when threatening did not work, they began to tarnish her character, calling her a “loose woman”. Next, they moved a step further to tell everybody that Kesar Bai was a 'Witch'. They tortured her and warned others to keep away from her.



Kesar Bai, a mother of 4 children, and a courageous woman, did not accept defeat. She stood against these situations. She complained to the police and got the offenders constrained. She says, she got the courage to do all this from ASWA. She adds, “today I can fight against all odds by myself.”

There Is No Need For You To Humiliate Me by Calling Me a 'Witch'....

Don't assume I am weak -- messing with me would prove to be problematic for you Because I am a Single Women of the Association!

Apologized in Front of the Villagers and Paid a Fine of Rs. 500

Gilol Bai age 45, from PENCH BAAVDI village, BUNDI District, is a widow. She is a Dalit and a member of ASWA for several years. She has worked on several cases for single women. The villagers disliked her, because she was very capable and had good leadership qualities. They tried to humiliate her for some reason or the other, to pull her down.



In the area where Gilol Bai was living, there were a few OBC's and most were members of general caste families. Whenever a child, cow, or a buffalo fell sick, it was blamed upon Gilol Bai. One day, the villagers crossed all limits. When a six-year-old girl living opposite the house of Gilol Bai fell sick, the girl's family and the villagers came to beat Gilol Bai. They warned her, if the girl did not get well, they would bury the girl and Gilol Bai together in the latter's premises! The “Witch” matter was getting out of control! Then Gilol Bai approached Zarina Bai, Sulochana and Beena - members of ASWA

and resident of the same village. The members of ASWA tried to talk to the family of the sick girl, and make them think rationally, but they were ready to kill Gilol Bai.

Then the sisters of ASWA went to the police station of Hindoli and lodged a complaint. They told everything to the SHO (Station House Officer). The police Inspector knew about the Association, and he took immediate action. He summoned the family of the sick girl and other villagers to the police station, and gave them a strict warning. Then the villagers got scared, and they started asking for forgiveness and gave assurance of not repeating their mistakes again. The women of ASWA insisted that they ask Gilol Bai for forgiveness in front of all the villagers. All of them asked for forgiveness from her, and also paid a fine of Rs 500. After witnessing all this, the villagers never again called another woman as a “Witch”. Even today, they tell each other, “if you want to go to the jail, then call somebody a “Dayan”, a “Witch”. Don't you remember what Gilol Bai did to us?”

All the single women members of ASWA spoke up, saying: “it will prove expensive to mess around with us, because we are the Single Women from the Association of Strong Women Alone”!

*It is well said by somebody,
These days, inhumanity is crossing all limits....“We can do nothing.”
Saying this, people are sitting quiet.
Saying this, shoulders are shrugged
Sometimes it is helplessness due to family,
and sometimes it's “what do I care???”
.Are we really helpless, or becoming inhuman?
After so many grave incidents, how are we sleeping peacefully?*



8. CLAIMING LEGAL RIGHTS

We will not let go of our Rights, at any cost.....

A. Land and Property Rights

*“Aadhi abaadi naari hain,
zameen , sampatti mein barabar ki
daavedaari hain.....*

Half of the population is women,
and they have an equal claim to land
and property....



We know our rights
And we do not beg from others

*Hum apna adhikaar jaante hain,
Nahin kisi se bheekh maagte ...*

We Know Our Rights, and We Do Not Beg From Others

By law, women have equal rights on the land or property of their in-laws and also of their maternal family. In this patriarchal society, the women are miles away from actualizing these rights. The women of “The Association of Strong Women Alone” (ASWA) has a lot of women who wish to claim their land and property rights. Though they are entitled to their rights on the land and property legally, they find it very difficult to have possession of their claims. Apart from their relatives from the in-law family, or and their maternal family members, their grown up sons, and the powerful men of the society are also a threat to them claiming their property rights.

Single women are often accused of having a bad character; they are called a witch; they are abused both physically and verbally – the reason behind all this is that others want to grab their land and/or property. The single and poor women neither have the necessary resources to fight court cases nor do they have the time to wait for the court's judgment. To have the possession of her legally-owned property, to maintain peace and to live a tension-free life, is a challenge! That's why the popular idiom “*jiski lathi uski Bhains*” which means “Might is Right” is still in force today, and it fits so well even in today's modern society.

These days, when it seems nobody has time or concern for anybody else, the members of the ASWA are coming together with full energy and efforts to help each other to get the rights of single women, whether it's their legal right to land or property, or ensuring they get their full wages, or any other problem for that matter. In the last 20 years, “The Association of Strong Women Alone” has stories of hundreds of cases of their struggles and victories. Here, we are going to share a few of their experiences.

*The Single Women Feel -- The Association of Strong Women Alone
(ASWA) is here, now we will get Justice!*

*We have strong hope and courage,
We are standing firm, the war is yet not over, and we have not lost.*

The Association, With the Help of Lawyers, Tackles a Tough Case Involving Forged Documents

Kamala Bai, of Kalaliya Village, Raipur Block, Pali District is a member of ASWA. She is a widow. Kamala Bai, along with her son Ravi, and Hanja Bai came to the Block Committee Meeting of the members of ASWA. Kamala Bai told Kunku Bai, (a leader in ASWA) that a person

named Uday Singh was trying to encroach their land. Kamala Bai said that she had the legal rights “patta” (official land ownership papers) of the land with her. She said a few years ago, there was a court case over the land between Uday Singh and her late husband Kishan Singh. The judgment of the case came after the death of her husband. But she was unaware of this. Now, when Uday Singh had started construction on the land, she got to know about the judge's decision of the court case.

Kunku Bai asked Kamala Bai to show all the papers before they could arrive at any decision. Kunku Bai went through the papers carefully and said that Kamla Bai had valid papers to prove that the land belonged to her. Uday Singh had the papers for the adjoining land which he had captured, and he had won the case for that land. According to the legal papers, the captured land belonged to Uday Singh, son of Devi Singh and the “patta” land belonged to Kishan Singh.

Kamala Bai, her son Ravi and Hanja Bai asked the ASWA for help. They mentioned they could not face Uday Singh all by themselves, as he was a very strong man. Kanku Bai and Chaggi Bai from ASWA went to the village of Kamala Bai. They had taken a few members of ASWA organization of Kalaliya village with them too.

When the members of the organization reached the Panchayat headquarters of the village, they were able to meet the Secretary but not the “Sarpanch” (Head) of the Panchayat. The Panchayat had issued a No Objection Certificate (NOC) to Uday Singh before he began his construction on the land in question. The ASWA women questioned the Secretary, as to why the NOC was issued to Uday Singh only, and not to Kamala Bai. The Secretary asked them to meet the Sarpanch in this regard.



The Sarpanch was a village woman. The Sarpanch's husband came and started abusing everyone, and stated that the land belonged to Uday Singh. The Members of the ASWA mentioned that this is a place of democracy and the equality of citizens, and the Sarpanch should have given the NOC to Uday Singh as well as to Kamala Bai. The members ASWA decided that they would have the rest of the talk at the site.

Then the Ward Councilor, (*ward panch*) the Secretary, and the Sarpanch arrived at the site, and they saw the construction work in progress. The members of ASWA asked Kamala Bai to show the members the land that belonged to her. Uday Singh arrived there with a few of his men. He showed the case file that he had, according to which he had won the “patta” land case. To this, the members of the ASWA replied that he had won the case for another piece of land and not for the land that belonged to Kamala Bai. Uday Singh replied that he had won the case for Kamala's land as well and he showed them the land papers.

The members of ASWA decided to meet a lawyer and deal with Uday Singh. The members went to meet a lawyer at Ajmer. They explained the entire scenario to the lawyer and showed him all the legal documents they had. The lawyer made some papers ready based on the documents that the AWSA members had presented to him on Kamala Bai's behalf, and asked them to submit them at the police station. The members went to the police station to submit these papers. But this did not help. The members of ASWA decided that they would now seek help from the villagers and thereafter, they could arrive at a decision.

The next day, about 30 members of the organization, along with the villagers had a meeting in Raipur Block, and everything about this case was



discussed. The villagers also supported the members of the Association, and everyone wanted to know the entire facts. The members of ASWA decided that they would now appoint a common lawyer for both the parties to get an unbiased judgment. They wanted the Sarpanch, the Police and a group of the members of the organization to be present during that time. The following day the lawyer was shown the land along with supporting documents. The villagers were in favour of Kamala Bai, saying the poor should get their land back. They wanted the decision made the same day, or else they wanted extra land for Kamala Bai. Uday Singh was not ready for anything. The policemen told Uday Singh to be fair, else they would ask Kamala Bai to file a report against him. Kamala Bai filed a case the following day and all the villagers went home.

Before too long, members of the ASWA went to the Panchayat. The Sarpanch, Ward Councilor and other members of the village were present. When the Sarpanch was questioned about Kamala Bai's NOC, they got a blunt reply that nothing was decided at the Panchayat meeting. Soon after, the members of ASWA called a few of their members and with the help of the villagers they knocked down the walls of Uday Singh's construction, as he had nothing to prove he owned the land, and the masons constructed a boundary wall and got a gate fixed to it.

Kamala Bai had now got her land rights because of the members of ASWA. Kamala Bai was really happy and she gave a donation of Rs. 1,000 to the organization and she strongly proclaimed, that without the help of the Organization this would not have been possible.

Sachhai ka bolbala, jhooth ka muh kala

Truth Dominates and Lies Face Defeat.

Usoolon per aanch aaye toh takrana zaroori hai,

If principles are at stake, its important to rebel,

Aur agar zinda ho toh zinda nazar aana zaroori

And if you are alive, it's important to show you're Alive.

70

Everybody Said Truth Always Triumphs – In the End!

Dhanni Bai is a strong member of the ASWA. She had been constantly fighting for the claim on her land for 20 years. Finally, with the efforts of the organization, after about a year, she got her land. The person who was falsely claiming ownership of her land came to the ASWA organization asking for forgiveness to save his job and family.

Dhanni Bai, is a widow and a resident of Bairava Village, Sogariya Panchayat, Ladpura Block, District Kota. Her husband had given 4 bighas¹ of land on profit margin to Mahavir for the last 9 to 10 years. When her husband passed away, Mahavir refused to give the profits to Dhanni Bai and told her that her husband had sold the land to him. Dhanni Bai was shocked to hear this and told Mahavir that her husband had not sold the land and Mahavir was cheating her.



Mahavir procured a Power of Attorney by fraudulent means, based on which he had got the land registered in his wife's name (Vimlesh). Then Dhanni Bai filed a case at the police station but the fraudster, Mahavir, was an employee of the railways and quite a powerful person. Everytime Dhanni Bai filed a case, he would bribe the policemen and get an FR (Final Report – “case closed”!) on the case. Dhanni Bai went around asking for justice but nobody listened to her plea.

One day, Dhanni Bai had come to attend the meeting of the ASWA with one of the single women members. When the other members were

¹ 1 bighain Rajasthanis roughly 5/8 of an acre.

sharing their problems, she told them about hers, and was in tears. The members of ASWA said they would do all the investigations and if Dhanni was right, they would certainly help her in getting her land back.

When the land documents were checked, it was already endorsed and was registered in the name of Mahavir's wife. But Dhanni Bai kept on repeating the registration was fake. The single women of ASWA decided to ask advice from a lawyer. They also went to Jaipur and got a private agency to check everything. The private agency submitted a report saying Dhanni Bai was right. The members of ASWA got the case reopened based on the report submitted by the private agency. They challenged the fake registry in the court.

The documents of Dhanni Bai were sent for enquiry. When the FSL department² did not submit a report of the thumb imprint or the signature even after a year, the women of ASWA met higher officials in Jaipur, and asked their assistance in obtaining the report at the earliest. After a month, the FSL report was received at the police station and it was presented to the court. Mahavir was found to be guilty. He was an employee of the railways, and he was suspended from his job and was imprisoned. His wife absconded for 3 months.

Mahavir approached ASWA to ask for a reconciliation to save his wife and job. But the members of the organization refused – Mahavir was jailed and his job remained suspended. All the members of ASWA drove a tractor on Dhanni Bai's land and helped in farming of Corn / Maize and Sesami. The entire family of Dhanni Bai was extremely joyous. With the help of ASWA, Dhanni Bai got back her land which was worth Rs. 50,00,000. Everybody said Truth always triumphs – in the end!

² FSL Department – Forensic Science Laboratory Department

B. Labour Rights

Full Measured Work Done – Full Payment of Wages **– Pura Kam, Pura Dam**

*“How did single women and these labourers get ahead of us?”
– So spoke the government functionaries of NREGA work sites
and the Panchayat elected and appointed persons.*

Jamila Banu, Sirohi District -- Jamila Banu, abandoned woman, a Muslim woman, is a resident of Village Morus, Pindwara Block, District Sirohi. In the year 2001 she joined ASWA.

In her panchayat, the work of NREGA³ was going on. Even on the completion of all the work, the wages paid to the labourers were only Rs. 80 to Rs. 90, whereas the average wages due were Rs. 172. If someone wished to apply for employment, the Assistant Secretary of the Panchayat did not accept their applications. He was a troublemaker.

Jamila Banu went to the office of the DMO office, along with the members of the ASWA and workers of NREGA. She lodged a complaint against the Assistant Secretary of the Panchayat, after which the Secretary was called to the DMO office and he was reprimanded. The Secretary then took the applications from the labourers immediately and issued them receipts.

After these efforts, 7 days later, the labourers were given work, but

³ NREGA -- National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. 100 days of labour per year per family, provided when a family applies for work at the Gram Panchayat level.



were not given their full wages. “How could all of us let go of our rights? We could not sit quietly.” 50 women and labourers collectively went to the Collector's office and lodged a complaint about not getting full wages. The Collector laid restrictions on the BDO, the Secretary and the labour gang supervisor (Mate). He sent the BDO to take measurements, and according to the measurements, the wages per day for the workers was Rs144. Then, all labourers with their names on the muster roll were given the wages @Rs144 per day.

The BDO, the Sarpanch, the Assistant Secretary, JEN, all of them came to the site and began pressurizing the labourers. They wanted the name of the person who motivated the labourers into complaining against them. The Sarpanch's husband, Magan Lal, started thrashing Jamila Bano. The members of the Association and the labourers went to the police station and filed a complaint about the beating given to Jamila. Seeing the state of things going out of control, the BDO, the Sarpanch, the Assistant Secretary, JEN, AEN⁴ reached the police station and asked the labourers, the ASWA members and Jamila Banu for forgiveness. Then Jamila asked the officials and elected representatives, “why did none of you come forward in my defense, when I was being beaten up by Magan Lal?” They said that thereafter they would not repeat their mistakes. They knew that their jobs were at stake. They asked forgiveness with folded hands.

The labourers felt that the officers should be forgiven for this first and last time. The Sarpanch was suspended for 6 months. After this incident, every worker is paid according to the measurement. And not only these labourers -- This case brought a massive change to the Panchayat – from that time on, all NREGA workers were paid in accordance to the work they had done.

⁴ JEN, AEN – JEN = Junior Engineer; AEN = Assistant Engineer

C. Rights to Benefits From Government Schemes

“Adhikaar apne aap ka, Nahin kisi ke Baap ka.”

Our Rights are totally ours, Not anyone else's.

We have come to know that we cannot achieve anything without fighting for it,
Now the women of my village are fighting for their Rights.

Whenever single women are deprived of their Rights, the women of ASWA have reached out to help them. With the help of ASWA, huge problems have been solved. There are many such successful cases. In June 2019, when the work of ASWA had started to hold monthly meetings at the panchayat level, many issues have come to light. One of these issues is the access to free fertilizer and seeds for the farmers. But are we sure that the poor farmers are benefited by these schemes at the ground level?

Single Women Farmers Benefit When ASWA Members Raise Their Voice

Kamla Bai, of **Barmer** District, Chautan Block, panchayat Alamsar, tells us, “in our village for several years, the seeds and fertilizers are sent for poor farmers. But the influential and powerful people are in fact taking the supplies that are intended for the poor farmers. By the time we go to get the seeds and fertilizer, they tell us the supply is finished, distributed. For the past 2 years we have not received any seeds or fertilizer.” **Pappu Devi**, a member of ASWA, came to know about this problem in one of the meetings. There were about 100 men and women attending that meeting. During the meeting, the members of ASWA

spoke to the Sarpanch, Secretary, and BDO⁵ telephonically, and asked them for an explanation – why were the seeds and fertilizer not distributed to the single women farmers? The women said that they would complain to higher officials if they did not get a solution to their problem.



The BDO made phone calls to the Secretary and the Sarpanch, and the Sarpanch soon reached the ongoing meeting organized by ASWA. The Sarpanch asked the single women leaders of the Association to make a list of single women who had not received their share of fertilizer and seeds. He asked them to send him the list of Single women, and assured that from now on, they would get their fair share of seeds and fertilizer with no hassles. The result was that about 50 women received free seeds and fertilizer.

D. Inheritance Rights

Betiyaan hain toh kya hua, adhikaar toh adhikaar hi hai...

What if they are daughters, Rights are Rights.....

Beti dil mein , Beti Will mein...

Daughter in the Heart, daughter in the Will...

As a brother I have been fulfilling all my responsibilities, then why should I part with a share of the property, and if I do, don't expect anything else from me in the future....

⁵ BDO – Block Development Officer

Shanti Bai and Badami Bai of Jalore District, Ahore Block are real sisters and also members of ASWA. Their parents are no more. Their brother was in the process of selling their ancestral property without telling them. Shanti Bai told her brother that ASWA has made them aware that sons and daughters receive equal rights to their father's property. She demanded her and her sister's share of the property or a cash compensation of Rs 2,00,000 each. Her brother did not agree to this.

Shanti Bai participated in the Block Committee meeting of ASWA and told them everything. To this Krishnaji, a social worker supporting ASWA, said that they would have to meet the Patwari (Government employee who keeps the land records) first, and then talk to the Sarpanch. She said that the Association should give a copy of a petition to the land revenue office at the Block or Teshil level as well, stating that the land could not be sold without the consent of Shanti Bai and Badami Bai.

With the help of the single women members of ASWA, she wrote such a petition and gave a copy each to the Sarpanch and the Patwari and asked them to ensure that the land could not be sold without their consent. They told the Patwari and the Sarpanch about the Association of Strong Women Alone (ASWA), but the Patwari and Sarpanch knew of ASWA from before.

With the help of the organization, both the sisters prevented the land from being sold. After this, they sat with their brother, other family members and the Sarpanch and came to a decision - “the day our brother sells the land, he should give us our share of Rs. 2,00,000 each.” To this, the brother retorted, “you are my sisters, and I have been carrying all responsibilities of a brother and I would do the same in the future as well. But if you demand a share of the property, don't expect anything from me in the future.” The members of ASWA said that legal Rights and family Relationships each have their own significance. “Why should you mix

the two?” Everybody tried to make the brother understand.

When he sold the land, he gave Rs. 1,25,000 each to the sisters in the presence of everybody. Both the sisters went to the Tehsil office to sign on the consent forms. Shanti Bai and Badami Bai thanked the members of ASWA after receiving their money. They said “we have learned from ASWA that we could fight for our Rights”. Badami Bai says, family relationships are important but it is also important to take our legal Rights; only then society will improve, and practice “rule of law”.

Kyon Darren kisi se , zindagi mein kya hoga, har vakt kyon sochein ki bura hoga.

Why should we fear about what is to happen in life?

Why should we always think that something bad is to happen,

Badhte rahien manzilon ki ore sada hum, kuch na mile toh kya, tazurba to naya hoga.

Lets keep moving towards our goals, what if we don't achieve anything, we would have gained new experiences.

The Association Helps Padma to Escape Death, and Claim Inheritance Rights

Padma did not lose courage even after being attacked with knife and scissors. She says: At a stage when people ask for death as a boon, I took an oath to live life.

Padma Mahavar aged 32 years is a widow and a resident of Mokha Pada , Kota Rajasthan. She has two children, and after



the demise of her husband, her beauty became her curse. Padma's father-in-law owned a house, which had 17 rooms. He had retired from a government job. After the death of his only son, his nephew was after Padma. He was a man of questionable character. Padma had 3 sisters-in-law; 2 of them were residents of Kota Rajasthan. Whenever Padma lodged a complaint against that man (the cousin of her husband), these 2 sisters would have him bailed out. They wanted Padma to leave their house. This way they could get all her share of the property.

One day, her husband's cousin tried to rape her. The tenants of the house saved her and somehow Padma tried to escape, but the cousin wanted to kill her. Padma reached the ASWA office with her children, and she narrated everything. Taking immediate action, some members of ASWA went to the police station and told the SHO everything. With great difficulty, the police caught hold of him and brought him to the police station, but he managed to escape. Padma and her children were sent to her house and they were given police protection. Padma's sisters-in-law had bribed the policemen and prevented them from cooperating with Padma and doing their duty.

Then the single women members of ASWA pressurized the police and asked them to arrest that man immediately. They made it very clear, if something happened to Padma, the police would be blamed. Within 2 days, the police arrested the accused man and presented him in the court. The Association also complained against her sisters-in-law because they were threatening her constantly. Padma received legal help, free of cost, with the help of ASWA.

Today Padma is living in her marital home happily with both her children. She has rented out 15 rooms of the house and is receiving all the rent. Today Padma has become a strong woman, who is always ready to help others. She says, if not for ASWA, she would have died. “I have got a new life. I was liberated from violence, and was given my Rights”.

There is Strength in Organization

Bharthi, a resident of Dungarpur District, Block Sagwara, panchayat Kakerva, is a widow. When her husband breathed his last, their daughter was a 10-year-old. For the next 6 years after her husband's death, Bharthi was living with her in-laws. Her brother-in-law had given her and her daughter just one room to live in and survive. She was not happy. She fought for her rights, but she was unsuccessful. One of her acquaintances told her about ASWA. She came to the Sagwara Block Committee meeting with her father. She told them about her miseries, and requested ASWA to help her in getting her rights and to free her from all her difficulties. The members said that they would try their best.

They suggested talking to her brother-in-law, and sorting things out with him. They thought that, considering he was a teacher in a government school, he would understand the legal issues. The members of ASWA brought this matter to the panchayat, but the brother-in-law did not agree to help her even then.

Finally the Organization resorted to police help. The members of ASWA went with Bharthi to file a report at the police station. The police said that they would come to the village and talk to her brother-in-law directly. Again, the members of the organization and Bharathi called the Ward Counselor and the police together to talk with the brother-in-law. Seeing all these people gathered, Bharathi's brother-in-law gave in. Bharathi was given her share of land and property.

What was not done in the last 6 years was done by the members of ASWA in just 6 days. Now Bharathi is very happy and is an active member of ASWA.

*Haq ke bina bhi kya jeena, yah jeene ke samaan nahin ...
Living without one's Rights, is a meaningless life.*

*Samaj ki pritsataamak soch nehi banaya mahila ko,
har jagah paraya, Sasural ho ya pihar, mahila per
apno nehi kahar barpaya.*

The patriarchal society has made the woman an unwanted "insider", in both her maternal or her in-laws home; her own people have wrecked havoc on her.



9. BRAVE SINGLE WOMEN

**“Be Brave,
and Only Then You Can Live in this World with Pride... “**

“Nothing is more important than the courage of a human being; Understand this – one who has never fought and struggled is a loser”



We all know that we live in a patriarchal society, and family and society feeds into the hearts and minds of women that they are weak and cannot do anything without men. But there is no doubt that for centuries now, history has recorded that women, in all eras, have a history of bravery, gallantry, sacrifice and have proved that women are not weak in any aspect. Today, women are rubbing shoulders with men in all walks of life, and working equally towards the development and growth of the country.

It's a common belief in society that women are the weaker sex, and in this respect, when one talks about single women (Ekal Nari), they are considered totally helpless, weak, and a subject for pity. But the women of the Association have always proved with their strength and bravery, that “we are single but not weak”. Come, let us know about the lofty courageous stories of a few of these single women who have shown “guts” and courage and have become examples of bravery.

Miri Bai Sent Thieves to Jail With her Courage.

“Miri bai says : who says that women are weak? If we make up our minds then we can defeat even the strongest.” In Kotda Block, Udaipur District, the roads are far away from the villages. The villages are not easily accessible in the difficult mountainous terrain with rivers, and streams. Added to that, there is little or no electricity. If in a place like this, some incident happens at night, then getting help is a far off thing; reaching the officials for help is a distant thought because of the lack of facilities.



A member of the organization, Miri Bai, who is a resident of Kotda Block, is a tribal widowed single woman. Her husband died 14 years ago, and she lives alone. Miri Bai has been a part of the organization for many years, and she has become quite strong. She is self reliant, and although uneducated, she does all her work using her mobile phone.

How did Miri Bai get the thieves apprehended? And how did the thieves accept defeat? On August 6th, at 12 midnight, 3 thieves broke into her house. She was sleeping outside her room. When the thieves sneaked in, she was woken up from her sleep. Out of 3 thieves, 1 was on the terrace, and 2 were inside the house. Miri Bai, got up and quietly closed and locked them the room and she started talking into the phone loudly, trying to give an impression to the thieves that she was talking on the phone.

In the meanwhile, Miri Bai called for her son and the villagers. She sent the news to the police and told them that she had the thieves locked in her house. But the police said that they would come only in the morning. However, the police could not come to the village the next

morning because the river which was in between the road and the village had overflowed the banks of the river. When the police finally arrived, Miri Bai, with the help of the villagers, handed over the thieves to the police. Later on, it was known that there was another thief as well who managed to escape. However, he was eventually caught, and even today, the thieves - Singo, Kiran and Pinto, are imprisoned in Gogunda and Bali prisons.

These thieves were from the adjoining villages and they had been stealing motor bikes and other things from the villagers, but nobody ever dared to apprehend them. Miri Bai showed her courage, and in spite of being alone, she got the thieves and handed them over to the police.

Miri Bai says that she got the courage and strength from the Association of Strong Women Alone. From the many training sessions that she has attended of the organization, she has learnt that if one has courage, one can do anything.

**With Courage and Presence-of-Mind,
Women's Lives Were Saved in the Train.**

“Success is achieved by people who do not brood over time and circumstances.”

“Vidhya Parik says that if we have courage and self confidence, then there is no problem which does not have a solution.”

Vidya Parik, aged 62 years, a widow and a resident of Chabra, District Baran has been a member of the Association of Strong Women Alone for the last 8 years, and is a leader who works with single women in 2 Blocks.

She was travelling by train from Kota to attend the monthly meeting in Chauth Ka Barwara Block of Sawai Madhopur District. She boarded the train in the women's coach, in which there were a few woman passengers and half the coach was empty. As the train left, an educated girl, who looked “high fly” got into the train. After about half an hour, that girl took some powder from her bag and she tried to blow that powder over the faces of the women who were wearing jewelry. Those four women fell unconscious. Seeing all this, Vidhya Parik was stunned with fear, but she mustered courage and asked the girl, “what happened to them”, to which she very innocently answered “what do I know?”



Vidya Parik understood that something was and not right, and she pulled the chain to stop the train. The girl was very angry with Vidya Parik, and asked her the reason that she had pulled the chain. Vidhya Parik said that her husband was in the other coach and she did not have her ticket that is why she had pulled the chain. The girl asked Vidhya Parik if she was crazy and uncivilized? She said out loud: “I wonder where these people come from who travel by train “. By then the train had stopped and all the T.T¹s had come to the coach. They started enquiring as to who had pulled the chain and why. The girl came forward and informed that “this uncivilized woman had pulled the chain because her husband is travelling in another coach and she does not have her ticket with her. I was afraid.”

Vidhya Parik told them “you people can see the condition of these unconscious women.” She pointed to the four women slumped over in

¹ T.T. – Ticket Taker or Travelling Ticket Collector on the train, a railway staff.

their seats. The railway staff were all astonished. Vidhya Parik told them about what she had seen, with the powder blown by the girl in the faces of the now-unconscious women, and the conversation that had taken place between the girl and Vidhya. Vidhya showed quick thinking about pulling the chain, and making up a story about her husband in another coach.

When the railway staff searched that girl, they found 52 mobile phones and the nails of her fingers had blades stuck to them. The railway police took the girl to the police station immediately and thanked Vidhya. They also said that she was a very brave woman. “From where did you get so much of courage and where are you going?” Vidhya told them about the Association of Strong Women Alone. The railway staff and police told her that today, she had saved her life and the lives of four other women as well.

“If only all other women had as much courage me, then it would be great!”

What Did He Assume – An Uneducated Woman from the Village Would Know Nothing?

Maina Bai says that people assume that uneducated people are fools. In so many ways they try to take advantage of them. “Based on my ordinary looks, the bus conductor concluded that I was an uneducated woman from the village who was ignorant of everything. But he did not know – I knew a lot!”

Maina Bai is a resident of Chandavat village, Beawar Block, District Ajmer. She has been a member of the Association of Strong Women Alone for several years, and an area leader for the past 1 year. On May

28th, when she left home to participate in the leaders' meeting, she got into the bus. After some time, the conductor asked Maina for the money for the ticket. She gave a Rs. 100 note but the conductor did not give her the ticket. When Maina asked for the ticket, since she had to show the ticket in her office to claim expenses, the conductor refused to give her the ticket. She requested him to give her the ticket 3 or 4 times. The conductor gave her a ticket torn into two pieces. Maina told the conductor that the ticket value of Rs. 45 was not visible. “I come regularly by paying



Rs. 45” she said. The conductor was annoyed and gave her a Rs. 80 ticket, which was meant for the male passengers. She was not given a 50 % concession ticket for women passengers. “I would be accused of forgery, if I submit this ticket! I want a Rs. 45 ticket only.” The conductor started to fight with her, but Maina was adamant. The conductor stopped the bus in the middle of the forested area and asked Maina to get out of the bus! The other passengers objected to the conductor's behavior, and made sure that Maina got back into the bus. Then, the conductor forcefully got her off the bus at Pipaliya Kalan village. Maina questioned the conductor about why he was treating her like that. Had she not paid him for the ticket? To this the conductor raised his hand to slap her but she pushed him away. The angry conductor left in the bus, and Maina Bai was left to reach the nearest bus stand on foot.

There, she inquired about the conductor but she could not get any information. Maina took the number of the police station and informed them by phone about the behaviour of the conductor. She told the police about her association with the Association of Strong Women Alone, and

also about the depot to which the bus conductor belonged. In a short while, the policemen reached the bus stand where she was. Maina Bai described the incident to the Inspector, and he asked her to accompany them to the police station to file a complaint. Maina Bai said she was on her way to attend the leaders' meeting of the organization and she could not miss it. The inspector filed the case and told Maina that they would find the conductor soon and inform her. Then she would have to visit the police station for the purpose of identification of the concerned bus conductor.

The police put Maina in a private bus to Udaipur (where her meeting was to be held) and asked her to call them if she required any help. When she reached the leaders' meeting, she told about this incident to all the members of the group. All of them congratulated her and said that she could face the problem fearlessly because of the courage derived from the organization. In the meeting, Maina Bai told the other members, whenever they face any problem, they should not be afraid, and face the situation boldly.

“The organization teaches us not to be a part of injustice.”

When We Dare, then God Sends Help– says Sarju Bai

Sarju Bai, aged 60 years, is a resident of Pratapgarh District, and she has been a part of the Association of Strong Women Alone from the beginning. She has struggled a lot in her life. She has also made several praise-worthy efforts on behalf of single women to help them get their rights. Sarju Bai shared an incident with us, telling how, in spite of being alone,



she had challenged the staff of a wine bar with courage and fearlessness.

Sarju Bai tells that a couple of years ago, when she went to Arnod Block for a meeting, it got quite late as she was trying to solve the problems of the women there. Since it was so late in the night, she could not travel back home so she had checked into a hotel room of an inexpensive hotel. The room that the hotel manager had given her was dirty, so she got her room changed.

At midnight, the hotel staff started to knock on the door of her room and wanted her to open the door. Since she did not open the door, they started abusing her. “Initially I was scared, that if I did not open the door, they could do anything with me because they were drunk. But I did not lose my grit and I yelled from inside that I was going to call the police. Since she did not have the number of the police, she called one of her lawyer friends who gave the number to call the police. She called 100 and told the police everything, and gave the name and address of the hotel. After sometime the police reached the hotel. They threatened the hotel staff and also whacked them. The hotel staff asked me for forgiveness, and that night I slept in that same hotel very peacefully.

With the example of this incident I would like to tell all my sisters everywhere, that, whatever the situation might be, we should never let go of our weapon of courage, and face all problems fearlessly.

Gulab Bai Sent Frivolous / Playful Boys to Jail **The Inspector Asked Her - From Where Did You Get So Much** **Courage**

Gulab Bai, a resident of Kota, showed her sensibility and saved the dignity of 2 girls. She recounted how one evening, when she was going home, she noticed that 2 boys were “eve teasing” 2 girls. The girls were

in a rickshaw on their way home. The boys were on a motorbike. Sometimes they would ride in front of the rickshaw, and at other times, they would come near the girls and utter some abusive words.

Gulab Bai could not bear to see this, and she immediately called the police on the number 100 and informed them of all that was happening there. The police

arrived there and took both the frivolous “eve-teasing” boys with them. She also accompanied the girls to the police station. She helped the girls to file a First Information Report (FIR) against both the boys. The police asked Gulab Bai “You look like an uneducated woman, then how did you get so much of awareness?” She told them that she had a lot of knowledge and awareness, and that she was a member of the Association of Strong Women Alone. “In our organization, we are given a lot of different kinds of information, like we are taught how to file a Report at the police station, about their Day Book, about government schemes etc..

The Chief Inspector was very happy hearing this and said: “Gulab Bai, you are very courageous and everybody should be as fearless as you.” He had both the boys arrested.



10. ACCESSING GOVERNMENT ENTITLEMENTS

Over the years, single women were made aware of various Government Schemes and Laws which ensured various Rights as citizens, and the Association of Strong Women Alone also helped the single women to claim their Rights, and access benefits of Schemes that would help them.

*“Leheron se dar kar nauka paar nahi hoti
Kosish karne walon ki kabhi haar nahi hoti”*
“A ferry cannot sail across if it fears the waves;
People who try, can never lose.”

We all know that the state and central governments have several schemes for social security and welfare for the deprived classes of citizens. One of the deprived classes is of low-income “Single Women”. The government's schemes have been existing for several years, yet many of the Single Women are unaware of these schemes. The schemes do not get enough publicity, and to get information about the schemes, and then to benefit from them, well, one has to go through a rigorous process! Single women are not well educated and they find it difficult to complete the processes of documentation as per the requirements. In situations like these, the government officials also make them run around for everything, because of which many women get tired and disappointed, and they give up and stay at home.



From the time that the Association of Strong Women Alone (ASWA) was formed, the members of the organization have faced several challenges and helped thousand's of Single Women to access government resources. The Association has also helped to improve the financial condition of the single women.

It's been 2 decades since the Organization was formed -- 20 years! The Association has data about the work done by ASWA in the last 10 years, and we can get an estimate about the number of Single Women who have been benefitted from various schemes. Sometimes, help was needed to get the required documentation ready, for which ASWA also gave assistance. A Chart of at least some of the Benefits for Single Women members of the Association can be found below¹.

Chart of Benefits of the Schemes

S.No.	Nature of the Scheme	Number of Single Women Who Benefited 2009 - 2019
1	Widow, old aged, separated, single women, physically handicapped pension benefits	24,995
2	Widow and single women 'Palanhar' Scheme (support to caregivers of children who do not have parents, or who have only 1 parent)	8,723
3	Getting government grants for the marriage of a widow's daughter	932
4	Getting the low-income single women enrolled in the BPL list (Below Poverty Line)	4,520

¹ The ASWA leaders usually took up cases for assistance only of “members” of the Association of Strong Women Alone. A single woman need not be a member if suddenly faced with a problem. But when she approaches the Association, they will ask her to become a member, and then all human and knowledge resources, as necessary, of the organization would be used to help her. Occasionally, the single women leaders are “soft hearted” and take up cases of “non-members as well!

5	Getting ration cards and PDS (Public Distribution System) problems sorted out so low-income single women can get grains, sugar, kerosene items at discounted rates from the Ration Shops	15,388
6	Helped single women to get employment under the NREGA scheme, and in other employment	17,857
7	Got the Job Cards made for NREGA work. There were many problems getting them made	5,841
8	Got the benefits of the Government Housing Schemes, Indira Awas Yojana, etc.	3,141
9	Got necessary identity certificates made: death, original address, caste, income, birth and marriage registrations. (needed for various Schemes)	28,561
10	Violence on women – physical, emotional, and sexual. Several cases were solved and justice granted	976
11	Cases related to land grab and division of land, Problems related to change of ownership of land were sorted out.	584 2,130
12	Appropriate suggestion and directions given to all the problems which the women brought to the organization	22,922
13	Help on other schemes and development works of the village - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Construction of cement roads in the villages ● Hand pump installation ● Electricity connections under BPL scheme ● Gas cylinder connections 	606 1,314 2,359 1,228
14	After joining the organization, the number of Single Women who have broken cruel caste and community customs, and have brought changes in social customs.	14,257

An Analysis

In the last 10 years, members of the organization have assisted several single women and other people to benefit under different schemes, the total monetary value of which would total lakhs of rupees. The scheme could be for women, and if she is a single woman, she receives the benefits of many other schemes as well. We have now totaled the numbers of women who benefited from different categories of schemes. We cannot total all the figures above, because a woman may benefit from more than 1 scheme. But you can see from the totals below, that the work done by ASWA has helped thousands or lakhs of women's lives. Whenever a woman is benefited by any scheme, it benefits her entire family.

- With the assistance of the Association, benefits received under the Governments schemes for Single Women - 1,14,151
- Advice and guidance given to Single Women and other women who came to the Organization for help. - 22,922
- Women who were supported in Changes in Social customs, - 14,267
- Cases related to violence on women and property cases, women were able to claim their rights and get justice. - 3,690
- Villages were helped to access schemes for making cemented village roads - 606
- In areas of water problems, the Association got the hand pumps installed – number of villages - 1,314

Note: when Villages were benefited by cement roads and handpumps, the numbers of villagers benefited would be in tens of thousands!

The Association Helped Anju Meena to Solve Her Child Care Scheme Problems

Anju Meena of District Sikar, Shrimadhapur Block, panchayat Kanchanpura is a widow and she joined the Association of Strong Women Alone (ASWA) about 7 years ago. She had applied for the “Vidwa Palanhar Yojana” or Widow Child Care Scheme support, but the bank account number that she had given in the Social Welfare Department was not operational. Due to this, the amount that had to be credited in her account was getting returned. This process continued for about 12 months. When Anju enquired at the Social Welfare Department, she was asked to approach the bank officials. When she went to the bank, they told her to enquire the Social Welfare Department! No body was giving a satisfactory solution to Anju's problem. But Anju did not lose hope.



Anju then went to the Block Development office, and met the clerk who was in charge of the *Palanhar* (Child Care) scheme. She told him that it was 2 years since she applied for the benefit. The clerk said that then she would not get her money, and the Association also would not be able to help her. He asked her to give a fresh application.

Anju's belief in ASWA did not let her lose hope. She went to ASWA and told them everything. All the women said, “How can we let go 2 years of the *Palanhar* benefit?”. A few of the single women accompanied Anju to the Social Welfare Department. They told the officials there about the organization and about Anju's financial condition. After listening to them, the official checked Anju's form which she had

submitted 2 years ago, and the details of the money that was returned to the Social Welfare Department by the bank. The officer asked the clerk to make a cheque of Rs 72,000 (seventy two thousand rupees) and transfer the funds into Anju's account immediately. Anju had tried all means to get this done, but was unsuccessful. Without the help of ASWA, this was impossible.

The Organization Is Our Strength and Weapon – Says Kali Bai

Kali Bai of Dausa District reported: “ 'My 'Child Care' benefit was not given to me for quite some time. Only after I approached the officials with the single women leaders of ASWA, did they give me a cheque for the pending amount. The Association of Strong Women Alone is our courage and our strength. It is due to them that we are able to fight and get our rights.”



When the BDO Was Harassing the Single Women Over Their Rights to a Scheme, the Women said “Our Rights are For Us, Not For Anyone Else!”

With the efforts of the single women of the Association of Strong Women Alone, 48 people got their installment of the Indira Housing Scheme.

Jaina of Barmer District, Block Siddi, along with Mohan Bai, Jabra Bai, Bhavri Bai, Rajo Bai etc had all made serious efforts to find a solution

to their problems. They have proved with their efforts and hard work that, 'once you make up your mind then, nothing is impossible'. A difficult work was made easy with the help of the single women of ASWA. They helped 48 members in getting the benefits of the Indira Housing Scheme.

All 48 beneficiaries of the Housing Scheme got their first installment credited into their bank accounts. But the women did not receive their second installment. They spoke about this in one of their meetings, and then went to the Block Office to sort out the problems. The clerk there said that they would get their installments credited into their accounts after the elections. A few months after the elections when the women went to enquire about their money, they were told that the Block Office had not received the funds, and once they received the funds, the amounts would be transferred to their accounts.

Some time later, a development camp was organized in their village. The District Collector was also an invitee at the camp. The women of ASWA spoke about this problem to the Collector. He immediately asked the Block Development Officer and the Panchayat Secretary of the village why they were not transferring the funds to the beneficiaries. Immediately, the BDO and clerk agreed to transfer the funds.

But when the sisters reached the Block Office of the BDO, they found that the BDO, the clerk and the Panchayat Secretary were all angry with the single women because they had complained to the Collector. The government functionaries also said, “you can go and complain anywhere you want, you are not going to get your money under any circumstance”! The single women said that they were associated with the Association of Strong Women Alone which would certainly help them to get their money. “If we don't get our Indira Housing Scheme installments credited in to our accounts, then we would meet higher officials for help.” After 3-4 days, the amounts were credited into the bank accounts. In total, 48 persons who were not getting their second

installments paid, received their money. When the Committee meeting of the Block was going on, the single women members of ASWA approached the BDO and told him that the beneficiaries should all receive their third installment in time also! “We will not leave a single rupee, and demand full benefit from this scheme – the money, after all, belongs to us”! With the knowledge of all the women of the Organization, and the Power of the Association, the Indira Housing Scheme benefits reached the people -- in totality.

Schemes Relating to Widows' Welfare were Denied, Because She Wore Her Brother-in-law's "Choorā"²

Prabhathi says she had the tragedy of becoming a widow at a young age. And then her marital family members asked her to wear the choora of her brother-in-law. She was not happy, as she neither got the benefits of a married woman, nor did she get the benefits of Widow Schemes of the Government. The women of ASWA got me all my rights and taught me to live.

² “choora” – red and white ivory bangles worn by brides for a period after marriage, in some communities, 1 year.

This case study makes clear that customary practices of keeping a woman in a relationship with a man, like this “choora” custom of taking-possession of the widowed sister-in-law, or “natha” or other common-law relationships, marrying a second woman without divorcing the first wife -- all “marriage-like” relationships outside marriage, are not counted as legal marriages. Registration of marriages brings clarity in this matter, and protects the marital rights of women. Other countries have enacted laws about common-law or other customary practices, but India has not yet done so. In this case study, since the widow pension is not eligible for widows who have re-married, and because the Sarpanch signed the papers, he affirmed that Prabhavati Bai was not married.

Prabhathi Bai is a widow of District Jhunjhunu, Navalgarh Block, Baswa Panchayat. Her husband passed away when she was very young. Her marital family members forced her into wearing the choora (symbols of becoming a wife) of her brother-in-law. There was no marriage ceremony, only bangles!!



She joined ASWA 2 to 3 years later, and she told the members that she was denied the widow pension. “My brother-in-law has snatched my share of the land.” When the leaders of the organization spoke to her brother-in-law, he said, “she keeps fighting all the time.” Two members of the Association went along with Prabhathi Bai to meet the Sarpanch of the village and to get the pension papers signed.

The Sarpanch said that she has worn her brother-in-law's bangles, how can she be eligible for the widow pension benefit? The sisters of the Organization asked, “what is the proof that she is wearing her brother-in-law's bangles? They asked the clerk, “for whom has the government brought out these schemes?” He replied “it's for widows and divorced women.” They then asked him, “isn't Prabhathi Bai a widow? She has the death certificate to prove her husband's death, then why is the pension denied to her? She became a young widow; the people of the family and the society made her wear the *choora* of her brother-in-law. Today when he has grabbed her land and is not treating her well, why aren't the people of the society standing up for her?”

The single women members said “now our Organization will stand with her, we will make sure she gets her rights.” The women then told the Sarpanch, “if you don't sign the form, then give us in writing the reason

behind it so that we can proceed further.” The Sarpanch signed immediately, and said that her pension payment would commence soon. The others present said that they will make sure that Prabhati gets her land back.

Now Prabhati is very happy and says that “the organization has taught me how to live! Because of the Association of Strong Women Alone, I have got everything; my pension, my land, and a job at the government nursery school – the *Anganwadi Centre*.” Now Prabhati Devi is helping several women get the benefits of government schemes. She has solved several cases and helped the single women to be happy within their families.

The Schemes Have Been in Force for Many Years, But the Benefits Were Enjoyed Only When the Association of Strong Women Alone Intervened

Bhagwan Kavar, a woman whose husband had abandoned her for more than 3 years, has been living in her maternal home for the last 7 years. She was a resident of Tonk District, Daveli Block, Panwad Panchayat. When she went to the Sarpanch to get her pension for abandoned women, he bluntly said there was no pension scheme for that category of women! Bhagwan Kavar tried hard for 2-3 years. Then, at one of the ASWA meetings in her village, the single women members showed the GO (Government Order) for the pension for Abandoned / Separated Women to the Sarpanch and the secretary, and her pension was sanctioned immediately.

The Villagers Tried Several Times Before To Get The Water Problem Solved, But Nobody Listened....

Kalavati of Jhalawar District, Manohar Thana Block, Daagipura Panchayat, Chittodi village, reported to the ASWA meeting, that for several years, her village had been struggling with water problems. The Sarpanch was also notified about the problems in writing. But no action was ever taken. When there was a meeting of ASWA at our village, the water problem in the village was discussed as the first priority. All the single women members of the Association who were present, went to meet the Sarpanch and told him in strong language, that he must solve the issue of the water problem. Very soon, 2 hand pumps were installed in the village! Nobody ever thought that this problem could have been solved so easily!



11. RUNNING THE COUNSELING CENTRE, THE “MSSK” IN KOTA

Success in “Women's Protection and Counseling Centre”; A journey that began 8 years ago...

The Government of Rajasthan in 2010 - 2011 opened several “Mahila Sureksha Salah Kendra” (Women's Protection and Counseling Centres) in the campuses of Women's Police stations in many District headquarters across the state. The responsibility to operate these Centres was given to non-governmental organizations. The Kota Centre was assigned to *Ekal Nari Shakti Sansthan* (the Organization of the Strong Woman Alone – OSWA). OSWA is the registered Society, and ASWA implements its objectives. The Organization has been successfully running the Counseling Centre for the past 8 years. We are sharing a few experiences of this journey.

Important figures of the work done by the Centre in the last 8 years –

S.No.	Description of the Services Done in the Cases	No. of Cases
1.	Gave personal advice, guidance, consultation and knowledge about how to fight for their rights and assisted the troubled women to solve their problems	3,843 total
2.	After the counseling given by the Centre, with mutual understanding and agreement, the women began living with their husband with a more harmonious family atmosphere.	1,328

3.	With mutual understanding, the women got back their Stri Dhan (money, jewelry, land, gifts earned by her labour, or given by a woman's natal family .)	258
4.	Women, who had safety and protection issues, had the police warn the troublemakers.	686
5.	Help received in getting their Maintenance from the Court.	110
6.	Separated / divorced women who got their children back from their marital homes.	288
7.	Destitute and homeless women were admitted to Shelter Home.	36
8.	When the Police refused to file a report, help was given to file a complaint in the police station.	217
9.	Assistance in filing an FIR (First Information Report) in the police station	157
10.	Help in providing medical facilities to ailing woman	58
11.	Women going through domestic violence were assisted under the Protection of Women against Domestic Violence Act of 2005.	435
12.	Assistance given to make a report of the Domestic violence, and help in presenting the case in the court.	34
13.	Suitable Action and help given in Dowry cases.	127
14.	Free Legal Help arranged for women who needed it.	135
15.	Distressed women who came to the centre were helped in becoming economically stable	36

In the table above, a few of the woman have taken help from the Women's Protection and Counseling Centre in more than 2 or 3

categories. Thus, the total numbers of woman who have benefitted are more than the number of cases.

In this journey of 8 years, the Centre has found solutions to some really difficult and challenging cases, just by facilitating mutual understanding and giving suggestions. Happiness has returned in the



lives of many sad and distressed women. We are sharing a few cases here. In accordance to the rules of the counseling centre, we have not disclosed the names of the women counseled, and have hidden their identity.

The efforts, and diligence of the counselors at the Counseling centre have been appreciated by everyone. On the 26th of January during the celebrations of Republic Day, the Divisional Commissioner and the District Collector of Kota, honored the counselors - Uma Singh Jhala and Jyothi Suvalka.

Got Relief From the Hellish Life of Prostitution

One woman came to the Counseling Centre with two other women. She said that 3 years ago she got into the bad company of a few women. She got drawn in to prostitution by temptation. She left her husband and three children. She indulged in prostitution for 3 years. She agreed that this decision of hers was totally wrong, now she was tired and wanted to get out of this bog. She desired to get back to her children and husband and have a domestic life.

Her husband was called to the counseling centre; the counselors spoke to both of them and made them understand the situation. The wife apologized to the husband and her children promising never to do such a

mistake again. In 2 sittings of counseling, the husband and the wife reconciled. The husband forgave his wife. Now she is happily living with her husband and children.

Meher and Iddat Amounts were Given

A 20-year-old Muslim young woman had come to the Counseling Centre. She had been married for three months; her marital family got to know that she had eloped with a man before marriage. Her husband wanted a divorce, but he was not ready to give her *Stri Dhan*¹, *Meher* and the *Iddat* that she was entitled to.

Her husband's family was quite powerful; they tried to use their political power to persuade the counselor. Whenever the family members came to the centre for counseling, they brought at least 15-20 people with them. Then the Centre formed a special team and did their counseling. Finally after 3 counseling sessions, both the parties were taken to Shari *Qazi* and the young wife got her *stri dhan*, and Rs 100,000 as her *Meher* amount.

Deceived With Promises of Marriage, the Deceiver was Sentenced to Prison

A 23 year old young woman was brought to the Counseling Centre by a helpful person. He told the counselors that this girl was about to commit suicide by jumping into the river. The counselors had her sit down, and gave her a glass of water to drink and then asked her about the reason behind thinking to take such a step.

¹ *Stri Dhan* - Gifts given voluntarily by family members and others at the time of a woman's marriage. These gifts are hers, even if the marriage breaks up. *Meher* is the mandatory gifts given by the husband to his new wife, at the time of marriage. It too is her property.

The young woman said that when she was 15-16 year old she got very friendly with the tenant who was renting a room at her parents' place. They fell in love, and he promised to marry her, and they had been having a sexual relationship since then. Now he has married a woman of his parent's choice.

She said, 'Now my family has disdain for me. My whole life is ruined. I have no option other than to die.'

The counselors at the Centre promised her that legal action would be taken against the young man. He was sentenced to life imprisonment and a rehabilitation programme was worked out for the girl.

Got the “Live-In Relationship” Couple Married

A young woman, aged 20 years, came to the Center, and narrated her problem.

She was in a “live-in relationship” with a young man and had been for the last 2 years. She said, “We are living like husband and wife. During this period, we got married in the court, but he has hidden the marriage registration papers now. I want to get married to him according to social customs and live with him. But he is denying this relationship and our court marriage”. The young man and the girl, and both their parents, were called to the Counseling Centre. The counselors spoke to them all, and after 2 sessions of counseling, the parents agreed to get the boy and the girl married socially. In the month of April, in a mass wedding ceremony, they got married in the traditional way. Now both the families are happy.



12. AN OVERVIEW – 20 YEARS OF THE ASSOCIATION OF STRONG WOMEN ALONE

This final chapter looks at the original objective of the Association of Strong Women Alone -- to improve the quality of life of Single Women -- and at the achievements made by the Association in the last 2 decades.

*“Aankhon mein manzilien thi, girte aur sambhalte rahe,
Aandhiyon mein kya dam tha, chirag hawa mein bhi jalte rahe”*

Dreams were in our eyes, they fell and rose again,
The strong wind had no power, cos' the lamp's flame continued to burn bright!

We are thinking back in time when, in the year 1999, at the Bassi Widow Convention in Jaipur District, several Single Women shared their life stories with tears in their eyes. Those who were there at that time said, “these problems have no solution; these women will have to lead lonely and suffocating lives by themselves”. But when the Association of Strong Woman Alone (ASWA) was formed, all the single women members of the organization raised their voices in unison on different issues! In these 20 years, it's never happened once, that they did not achieve success, at least some success.

The Single Women, “*Ekal Nari*”, have created their own identity, from the Panchayat to the National level. Along with this, they have cooperated and joined with other organizations, campaigns and networks working with similar principles, values, and dreams, and have improved the quality of life of thousands of Single Women. They have

achieved hundreds of successes in the social, financial, cultural and political fields related to Single Women.

A small group, which started with 450 single women at the Bassi Convention is today a strong group of 69,083 sisters. In their journey of 2 decades, the women of the organization have brought about many changes in various fields. We are sharing a few of those episodes, which have brought radical changes. Although it's difficult to capture the successes of the organization in words or sentences, yet we are trying to share a few of the achievements of the Single Women's Organization.

Achievements and Successes, Resulting in Social and Cultural Changes

Before the Association was formed, the Single Women were tied down with several confining, marginalizing and cruel customs of society. But in these 20 years, the Single Women have challenged the malpractices of society, and have encouraged the Single Women to change their thinking about themselves, and also the thinking and views of society towards them.

- After joining the organization, the Single Women have gained a lot of Courage and Self-Confidence. With these qualities, they are creating their own space and identity in their village, town or city; in their society, caste or community; and in their family.
- The loneliness of the Single Woman has ended; she has found an Alternate Family in the form of the Association.
- Young Single Women are remarrying with the help of the organization.



- Single Women, who never stepped out of their homes, are now travelling alone to the Block, District and the State capitals. They also participate in the 3-4 day residential training programs and conferences. These experiences help in boosting their self-confidence even more!
- They have developed the quality of analyzing and discussing with people. They are now able to give talks in the Village Assembly (*Gram Sabha*). They have found their Voice!
- The women are now fighting for their human rights, and are taking their legal inherited share in land and property, and also claiming the government benefits to which they are entitled. They are united, and are fighting for these rights together, for themselves and for each other.
- Most of their rights are won "out of court", due to their collective action, their knowledge of laws, rules and schemes, and a knowledge of the structures and systems of civil and state society. The strength of numbers which gives the ASWA power – means that corrupt and exploiting people know that each Single Woman is not alone! With mutual talks, most of their issues are solved, and paving the way to help Single Women to claim their rights.
- Single women now are actively participating in the decisions taken at home and in their families.
- The members of the Association have been showing leadership qualities at the local, state and national levels.



- They are self-sufficient in taking the benefits of government schemes and they also to help others in getting their benefits.
- The members of ASWA are breaking the cruel customs and norms of society and are participating in the marriages and performing auspicious ceremonies of their children's lives; they are wearing colorful clothes, bindi and decorating their hands with henna/mehandi.
- The members of the organization, besides solving the problems of Single Women, are solving different issues of the society like: female feticide, the dowry system, ban on alcohol, child marriage, corruption, delay or mis-management of rural development resources, needed changes in social malpractices etc.
- The members of the Association are working towards changing the mindset of the people. They are working towards a clean, non-violent, peaceful, and harmonious environment.
- The members of the organization have understood and are making the Single Women understand the meaning of violence on women, so that they don't assume it to be their fate, but stand against it and oppose it.
- Motivated by the Single Women members of the organization, others – the caste elders, caste panchayats, society, and public representatives – are doing continuous lobbying and advocacy, and some changes are coming in the age-old customs of the society. The society has now become a little sensitive to the issues relating to Single Women, and the Single Women of ASWA are trying to take others along with them, to change the mindsets associated with widows, separated, divorced and older-never-married women.

- As the single women of the Association are working in the role of “leader”, their interest towards education is also increasing. They are learning to read and write in the literacy camps organized by the organization, and they are increasingly able to do their work by themselves, even some of the written work.

Changes in the Rules, Resources, Policies of the Government, Achievements and Successes

In the last 20 years, the members of the Association, along with the government and administration, have succeeded in the formation of several policies, rules and laws for the benefit of the Single Women. The process of implementation of these policies has been well publicized, resulting in these achievements:

- In the widow pension scheme, the earlier rule was that if a widow had a son of 25 years or older, no pension was allowed (assuming the son would look after his widowed mother. This is very definitely not always the case!). This rule was abolished. Due to this, thousands of women received their pension.
- In the widow pension scheme, the government increased the monthly income in the pension amount.
- The widow pension was re-named as “*Mukhya Mantri Ekal Mahila Samman Pension Yojana*” (Chief Minister's Single Women Pension Scheme). A pension, for the first time, became possible for eligible separated, abandoned, divorced women and not just widows.
- Abandoned / separated women were defined: “a woman who was separated from her husband for a minimum of 3 years” was eligible for a pension and also for other schemes made for Single Woman.

- Recognition was given to the decree of a Qazi to verify eligible Single Muslim Women for the Social Security Schemes and government jobs.
- Widow Child Care or Child Welfare Scheme was started. In the beginning a monthly allowance of Rs. 675 was given for each of 2 children. Later, after the Association demanded for an increase, the amount was increased to Rs. 1,000 per child, up to 3 children. Other Single Women (separated, abandoned, divorced, etc.) were also included in this child welfare scheme.
- Single Woman received priority rates in the Food Security Act.
- Separate Job Cards for widows and Single Women were allowed for work under the employment guarantee scheme, NREGA.
- Single Women were given priority in drought relief works.
- Single Women were given priority for employment in Government and non-Government departments' work, like "Mate" or Labour Supervisor in NREGA, Anganwadi / nursery school worker, ASHA Sahyogini worker / health worker, Saathin, School mid-day meal cook, etc.
- Rajasthan Skill and Livelihood Development Corporation (*Rajasthan Aajivika Kaushal Vikas Nigam*) – the Livelihood Training Scheme of the state government, on the insistence of the Association, increased the maximum age limit for the Single Women from age 35 to age 45, made changes in the minimum education requirement rules, and added some new training programmes that did not require literacy. More single women could then benefit from the livelihood training offered.
- Quotas for Single Women as teachers was introduced.
- Single Woman did not have money to pay in advance for the construction of a toilet. They requested the government to

organize for the construction of toilets in their village. The Government got the toilets constructed with the help of the panchayats in these areas.

- 3,000 housing units were allocated for Rural Single Woman.
- A Grant for widow remarriage was introduced. It began with Rs.15,000 and was later increased to Rs.30,000.
- On the insistence of the Single Women Farmers at the *Kisan Ekal Mahila Sammelan* (Single Women Farmers' Conference), women small farmers were issued Kisan Credit Cards from the Government.
- After the *Kisan Mahila Sammelan* (Woman Farmers Conference,) Single Women were given priority in *Kisan Sakhi* and *Pashu Sakhi* Schemes – to be selected as para-workers for agriculture, and para-workers for animal husbandry.
- With the efforts of the organization, the pension for old-age widows has been fixed at Rs. 1,000.
- The grant for a widow's daughter's marriage has been doubled.
- The Witches Act (*Dayan Dakan Adhinyam*) was passed. The organization made several efforts for the implementation of this Act, as the most affected persons were Single Women.

The Changes and Achievements that Have Come in Political Participation

Single Women have gained self-confidence and leadership qualities after joining the Association of Strong Women Alone. In the elections to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI), some Single Women of the organization have been elected to become the Sarpanch / President , or Ward Councilor, in the Gram Panchayat / Council of Village(s), etc.,

- The participation of women in the Council of Village(s) / Gram Panchayat increased, and they raise the issues related to women and Single Women in the Council meetings.



- Rajasthan Government's policy to have 50% reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions has helped Single Woman to contest elections. In the last Local Self-Government elections, they stood for the posts of Sarpanch, Ward Panch etc., and some of them have also won.
- Members of the organization, individually and collectively, have been maintaining contact with various public representatives – Sarpanch, MLA, Zila Pramook (District Council Head), MP by meeting them to put their demands forward on different issues of the society. Because of this advocacy work, many public representatives understood and were sensitive to the issues of Single Woman, and raised various issues of Single Women in the Assembly as well.
- Since the Members of the Organization are huge in numbers, during elections, a few of the public representatives come to them asking for help (and support!). They assure them of doing their work once they win the elections. The participation of the Single Woman in political processes is increasing.
- Now women understand the power of their vote and are learning to elect the right candidate.

Changes in Economic Status

After the Association was formed, the economic status of the single woman has strengthened considerably.

- They are accessing benefits from different social schemes of the government – from schemes like: pension, child welfare, housing, BPL,(Below Poverty Line), Grains from ration shops, free medicine, NREGA guaranteed employment, etc.
- They are getting their right to property in the maternal and marital homes, and so have a stronger economic status.
- Almost all Single Women are involved in some sort of farming activity – field crops, animal husbandry. The ASWA work with Women Farmers and the Conventions help them to increase their income as farmers.
- Joining the Organization has increased their knowledge, because of which they began to get work as Aganwadi Worker, Sahayika, Sathin, ASHA, Mate, Kisan Sakhi, Pashu Sakhi, and cooking mid-day meals in schools.
- Some have started increasing their income from self-employed activities.
- Daily Wage Labouring and working as a seasonal agriculture labourer are still wide-spread activities of the Single Women members. Separate Job Cards in their name for NREGA work, has helped the single women to some extent.



APPENDIX NUMBER 1

Census Data about Numbers of Single Women in India

Comparative Data, 2001 and 2011 Census Data Female Population by Marital Status

We have gleaned the following information from the Census data tables on Marital Status by Age (classified as C2 on the Census of India website) for both 2001 and 2011.

S.No.	Category	Census 2011	Census 2001
1.	Total Female Population	58,75,84,719	49,65,14,346
2.	Female Population (age 15 +)	40,94,91,978	32,23,90,856
3.	Currently Married Women (all ages)	29,30,77,472	23,67,72,617
4.	Never Married Women (age 35+)	41,66,136	25,09,854
5.	Widowed Women (all ages)	4,32,61,478	3,42,89,729
6.	Separated Women (all ages)	23,72,754	23,42,930*
7.	Divorced Women (all ages)	9,09,573	
8.	Total Single Women in India (sum 4 to 7)	5,07,09,941	3,91,42,513
9.	Female Headed Households	2,68,88,926	1,99,87,958

* In Census 2001 disaggregated data is not available for Separated and Divorced women.

Some Important Statistics

- Single Women constitute 8.6% of the total female population in India, and 12.4% of all females age 15 and older.
- A country made up of Indian Single Women would be the 24th most populous nation in the world, ahead of South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Australia and many more.
- Singlehood seems to be a problem mostly for women. The numbers of widowed, separated and divorced men are considerably less than those of women in similar situations, 1,38,92,420 men as compared to 4,65,43,802 women.
- Percentage growth in female population is 18.3%, while that in the number of Single Women is 29.6 %. Over 10 years, there are a larger number of older widows, and also a larger number of never married women over the age of 35, pointing towards both demographic and societal changes adding to the growth in numbers of Single Women.
- The number of Never Married Women over the age of 35 has seen a sharp increase of almost 66 %. This seems to indicate an increase in the number of women choosing to stay unmarried, or women deciding to marry late.
- Female headed households have grown by 34.5 % and given the ever increasing migration of young men to cities it seems that the number will continue to grow. This again is a worrying trend, as policy making largely continues to cater to male headed households.

- In 2001 data about separated and divorced women was not disaggregated. This year the data has been disaggregated. This has been possible due to the intervention of the National Forum in 2009, which had demanded that Separated women be enumerated separately. The Government agreed.
- The data regarding Separated Women does not seem to reflect the reality, as we feel that the number should be more. It is true that due to social stigma many women and their families would not admit of marriage breakdown to a data collector.
- As in 2001, in 2011 the data continues to show the existence of married females under the age of 18 years, resulting in a small number of widowed, separated and divorced females under the age of 18 years.



APPENDIX NUMBER 2

Contacts for Single Women Organizations in India

Readers of this book who want to contact the Association of Strong Women Alone, *Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan*, Rajasthan, may do so by writing, visiting, or emailing to –

Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan, Rajasthan

3 Pipala House
 Raj Bhawan Road, Civil Lines,
 Kota, Rajasthan 324008 India
 Phone: 0744-245 0726
 Email: ensskota@gmail.com

Readers of this book who want to inquire about whether there are organizations of low-income Single Women in other states of India, and if so, how to contact them, are invited to contact the National Forum for Single Women's Rights. Write, visit or email to –

The Secretariat

National Forum for Single Women's Rights

39 Kharol Colony
 Udaipur, Rajasthan, 313 004 India
 Phone: 0294-245 1391
 Email: natforum09@gmail.com

APPENDIX NUMBER 3

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF STRONG WOMEN ALONE

