
EMPOWERING CIVIL SOCIETY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN JHARKHAND

SAMVAD: A CASE STUDY



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Introduction

The "Empowering Civil Society for Social Change in Jharkhand" project (the project) was a collaborative effort between the Civil Society Academy and Gender at Work aimed at strengthening civil society organisations (CSOs) in Jharkhand. This initiative, funded by the Oak Foundation, was implemented in two phases: Phase 1 from October 2018 to December 2019 and Phase 2 from January 2020 to June 2023.

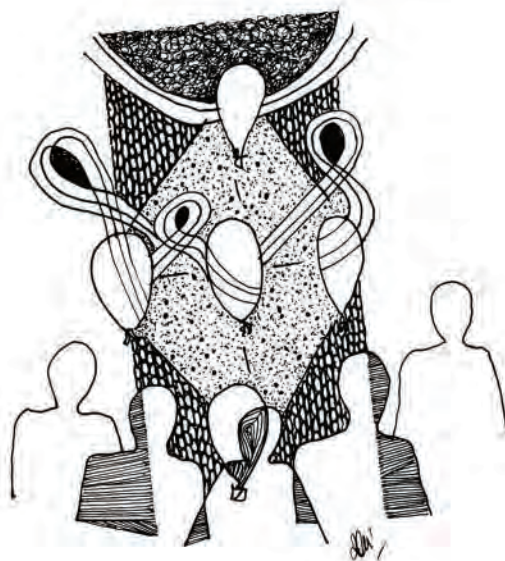
The project had two primary objectives:

- To enhance leadership capacity within civil society organisations in Jharkhand to contribute to positive social changes for marginalized groups.
- To build strong grassroots Civil Society Organisation (CSO) networks to support social change movements in Jharkhand.

Five organisations/networks, identified by the Oak Foundation, participated in the project: Jharkhand Anti-Trafficking Network, Samvad, Ibtida, Ekjut, and Maitri. Gender at Work focused its interventions on building the capacity of the Jharkhand Anti-Trafficking Network and Samvad, while the Civil Society Academy directed its efforts towards Ekjut and Maitri.

The project focused on strengthening organisational capacities, promoting CSO leadership, fostering solidarity and alliance-building among CSOs in Jharkhand, and providing a platform for critical reflection and dialogue. Additionally, the project invested in building a cadre of organisational change facilitators in Jharkhand to continue supporting CSO capacity strengthening efforts beyond the project's duration.

This case study assesses and documents the contribution of the project (and the role of Gender at Work) in building the capacity of Samvad. Specifically, it examines the types of capacities strengthened and the difference this has made to the organisation. It also considers the processes through which these changes have occurred (the pathways of change).





Methodology

The methodology employed for developing the case study relied on a qualitative approach and encompassed the following methods:

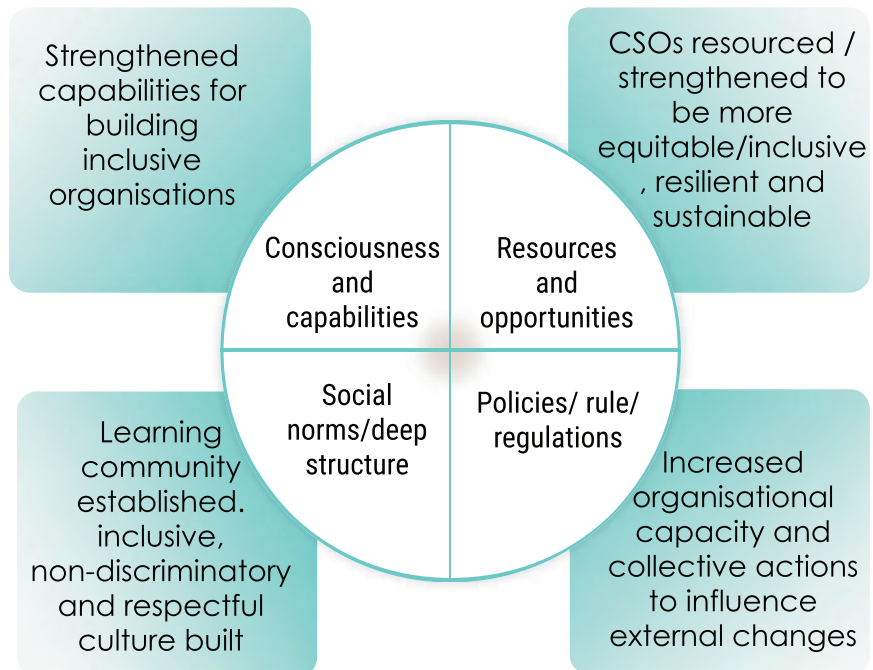
- A comprehensive desk review of programme documents, including workshop reports, reports to funders, and other relevant reports.
- Interviews with key programme staff at Gender at Work and facilitators.
- In-depth interviews with three members of Samvad's senior leadership and three field coordinators.
- A focus group discussion with six field-level staff directly engaged in community work.
- Follow-up, in-person meetings with key stakeholders at the 'Learning Harvesting Workshop' held in June 2023.

Two, main limitations were encountered during the data gathering process:

- Interview participants displayed better recall of more recent trainings compared to earlier learning experiences. To mitigate this gap, the literature review was leveraged.
- Virtual, online interviews, particularly with field level staff, presented, in some instances, connectivity challenges. In-person interactions and meetings with project participants at the Learning Harvesting Workshop, however, helped to clarify and resolve data gaps¹.

Gender at Work Framework

The Gender at Work framework was used to analyze the findings across the four, inter-connected quadrants of change: consciousness and capabilities; resources and opportunities; rules, policies, and regulations; and social norms and deep cultures. (Figure 1). The Gender at Work framework is useful for highlighting individual and organisational changes across formal and informal spheres¹.



This case study is divided into three sections. It begins with an introduction to Samvad as well as the project implementation context. Findings are then presented by each quadrant, as in Figure 1. Finally, the case study concludes by examining factors that influenced the changes and highlights key lessons learned.

¹ See <https://genderatwork.org/analytical-framework/>





Background

Formed in 2001, Samvad's history is intrinsically linked with the long-standing struggle for a separate state of Jharkhand in India. This struggle represented the aspirations of indigenous communities for the recognition of their rights to self-determination, encompassing their distinct identity, culture, and control over natural resources. The founding members of SAMVAD were part of this struggle. However, once statehood was achieved in 2000, it became evident to the founders that the struggle for the indigenous rights, particularly over 'jal, jangal and jameen' (water, forest and land) was not over.

Samvad was formed by social activists and intellectuals to mobilise and raise the awareness of indigenous communities, Dalits, women and religious minorities on their rights. Samvad's vision is centred on creating a society that balances human-nature relations, preserves indigenous values and fosters sustainable livelihoods. Its mission is to realise self-governance (swasashan), self-reliance (swawlamban) and dignity (swabhiman) based on equality, equity and local governance systems. Samvad achieves these goals by organizing rights awareness campaigns, implementing capacity building projects, promoting sustainable livelihoods, advocating for indigenous rights and women's empowerment, and strengthening Gram Sabhas² and local governance systems³. Samvad currently works in over 200 villages in Jharkhand.

Prior to the project intervention, Samvad was already a well-established and recognized organisation that was led by a robust and centralized leadership. A needs assessment conducted at the beginning of the project identified requirements for enhancing the organisational culture and leadership. However, given the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the more restrictive 2020 amendments to the Foreign Contributions (Regulations) Act of 2010, project interventions necessitated a greater emphasis on organisational strategizing and strengthening to support Samvad to adapt to new ways of working and to support diverse models of resource generation

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as an external shock to the entire landscape of CSOs in India⁴. Seizing the crisis as an opportunity, and without prior consultations, the government introduced amendments in 2020 to the already restrictive Foreign Contributions (Regulations) Act of 2010 (FCRA), which further limited CSO funding from international sources⁵. Human rights-based organisations like Samvad, which relied on funding from key foreign donors, faced an existential threat. Resource mobilization to achieve their feminist/human rights objectives became an imperative.

² A Gram Sabha is a village-level democratic institution in India where all eligible residents come together to discuss and make decisions on local governance and development matters.

³ See <https://www.samvad.net/activities.php>.

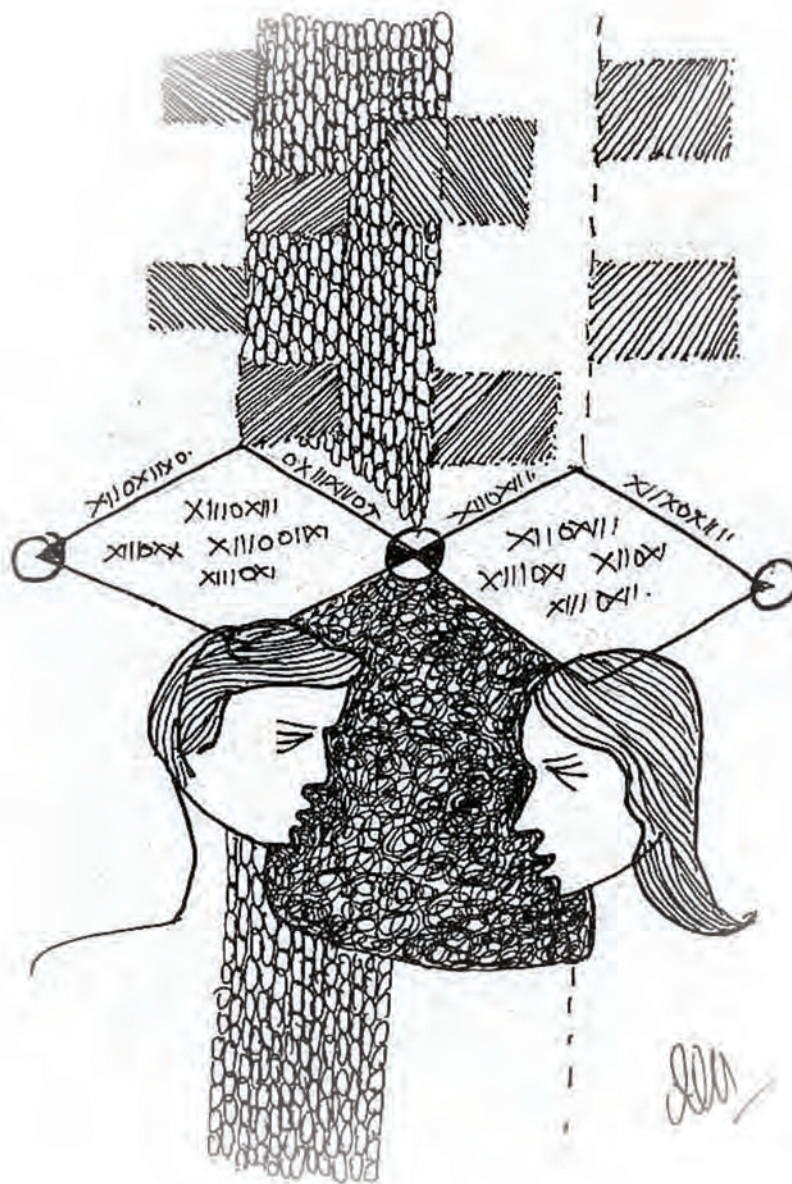
⁴ UN Women (2020). Rapid Assessment: Impact of COVID 19 on Civil Society Organisations. https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAsia/Docs/Publications/2020/06/CSO%20urvey%20brief_26%20Aug%202020.pdf

⁵ Srinath and Shetty (September 2020). Bleak prognosis for Indian civil society following new foreign funding bill. <https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/fcra-bills-impact-on-civil-society-in-india/>



In this context, the project initially worked with select members of Samvad's 14-member core working team, which included representation from administrative, programme and communications departments. While there was more active participation from Samvad's senior leadership at the beginning, over time and as the project evolved, more deputies, second line leaders and field workers also became involved.

The project focused on strengthening team coordination, advocacy, documentation, communication, fundraising, and leadership and organisational development. Most of the trainings were conducted individually by Gender at Work and some jointly with the Civil Society Academy⁶.



⁶ Over the course of the project, SAMVAD benefitted from five exclusive workshops designed and led by Gender at Work; nine joint initiatives co-delivered by Gender at Work and the Civil Society Academy; two reflection meetings (Gender at Work) and a Learning Harvesting Workshop (Gender at Work) held at the end of the project.





Findings

Individual consciousness and capabilities

Changes in individual consciousness and capabilities were observed at all levels, from senior leadership to community mobilisers. These changes were primarily attributed to the leadership workshops attended by staff.

At the senior leadership level, two significant transformations were noted: a deepening relationship with board members as well as a noticeable shift in how senior leadership interacted with colleagues.

There are two visible changes that I can point to. First, our interactions with our board members/ trustees. Previously, not all of them were active. The board was instituted for legal compliance rather than a more substantive role. Now with the trainings, I feel that our relationship has deepened.

I also feel a difference in the way I approach my colleagues. Previously our orientation was only related to aspects of project implementation. However, now we pay attention to understanding their personal situation and to assess if there are any areas for capacity building. Although we do not have formal programmes in place, we place emphasis on coaching and mentorship and have included this as part of performance appraisal processes. (Senior Leader, Samvad)

All senior leaders expressed interest in continuing with leadership development initiatives to meet the requirements for programme growth and expansion. According to them, their participation in the project has fostered this kind of thinking.

Project coordinators also reported an increase in confidence and improved communication skills, which have led to enhanced teamwork and coordination.

We gained more clarity on our own leadership roles, particularly in terms of how to do teamwork and how to coordinate. (Field Coordinator, Samvad)
We have gained more confidence to do the work. We can resolve conflicts among field workers and have repeatedly applied the lessons we learnt in our work. (Field Coordinator, Samvad)

I gained a lot of confidence after the trainings. We learned about connecting with people, how to work better with our team members, how to disseminate information and get our messages across. I feel we now work better with the community, as well as understand office processes and our roles within the organisation better. (Field Coordinator, Samvad)





I have found the lessons on conflict resolution to be very useful. It is important to understand and manage expectations. Nowadays, I am conscious of not dumping work on my colleagues. Instead, I try to explain tasks to them gently. This has improved our communication and reporting. (Field Coordinator, Samvad)

Similarly, many of the community mobilizers interviewed reported increased confidence in delivering projects at the field level. This has been especially useful given their active role in mobilizing communities, particularly women, to participate in local governance processes. Interviewees recalled lessons on team building and group dynamics, on improving communication with community members and colleagues, managing relationships with team members, fostering connections with others, and understanding organisational processes and roles better.

I was promoted from community mobiliser to trainer. I have more confidence now. I am a single woman, but I live alone, travel alone, and manage my areas. The leadership training helped me stay connected with my team and others working in the same area or on different themes. Being mindful of language and cultural issues has helped me build trust in the community and we receive a lot of community support. (Community Trainer, Samvad)

A key factor that influenced these changes were the pedagogical approaches applied in the workshops. The participatory learning methods employed were highly praised by nearly all those interviewed. Instead of relying on traditional lecture formats, workshop facilitators employed interactive methods such as games, group discussions, and other engaging techniques to foster learning through dialogue.

I truly appreciated the training methods used. The facilitators and the Gender at Work team were well coordinated. They drew insights from us, without overwhelming us with information, and instead, explained the reasoning behind specific approaches. The sessions were highly participatory. This has had an impact on how I interact with my colleagues now. I make a conscious effort to be more participatory. (Field Coordinator, Samvad)

Another key factor that facilitated these shifts was the facilitation team itself. Facilitators were meticulously chosen, each bringing their distinct individual experiences and strengths while also functioning effectively as part of the team. Not only did they possess the requisite collective expertise, but they were also highly approachable. Many interviewees felt they could approach the facilitators for support well beyond the workshop sessions, leading to lasting relationships with them.

Each facilitator played a distinct and vital role. At the outset, Chand focused on sensitizing us to more compassionate ways of working, Yogesh concentrated on enhancing our community engagement, and Haritha supported our efforts in institutional strengthening. (Secretary, Samvad).





Resources and opportunities

Based on the needs identified by Samvad, the project incorporated training sessions on specific themes, with a particular focus on fundraising, reporting and documentation, and the utilization of digital tools. Respondents unanimously emphasized the effectiveness and relevance of these interventions. The changes brought about by these trainings not only enhanced organisational resilience and efficiency but also augmented resources for women in the community.

Diversifying funding sources

As previously mentioned, FCRA amendments jeopardized the viability of human rights organisations like Samvad, prompting an urgent focus on diversifying funding sources. The joint fundraising workshop introduced Samvad to new strategies like individual giving and corporate social responsibility to support a shift away from a heavy reliance on international funding⁷. This training equipped Samvad staff with skills for actively seeking and preparing funding proposals from diverse sources.

The fundraising training proved particularly valuable as it introduced us to several new ideas and helped us grasp current trends and various fundraising methods. Previously, we relied on international funding, but we are now actively exploring avenues for domestic funding. Working on a recent project proposal provided an opportunity to apply the lessons in practice, increasing my confidence in proposal preparation. We have put a team in place and are now consistently and intentionally searching for additional funding sources. (Senior Leader, Samvad)

Enhanced documentation and use of digital tools

Another area of capacity development that received high appreciation from interviewees is reporting and documentation, particularly the use of storytelling. These workshops significantly improved Samvad's reporting practices. The importance of capturing even the smallest stories was acknowledged, resulting in the compilation of several powerful narratives which not only described Samvad's programme impact but also surfaced community needs and priorities, especially those related to women.

We have observed a significant improvement in our reporting processes. In the past, we used a rather basic format that omitted crucial details. However, thanks to the training, we now recognize the importance of capturing seemingly small but vital details. The case study method allows us to be more cognizant of changes and transformations that may have happened due to our interventions. (Senior Leader, Samvad)

One of our field-level staff members attended the documentation training and has consistently been producing high-quality reports. She has also been training other field staff on documentation. We have now established a documentation system with various formats to capture different types of information. This system enables us to conduct regular reviews, identify gaps, and make necessary course corrections. (Senior Leader, Samvad)

⁷ Civil Society Academy led the delivery of the fundraising workshop, with co-facilitation provided by Gender at Work.





Capacity development for documentation was complemented by training on the use of digital tools, a particularly relevant need during the COVID-19 pandemic when physical meetings were prohibited and movement was restricted. The need for accessible online storage also became evident, as did the necessity of conducting work online. As a result of these trainings, Samvad has embraced various digital tools and platforms to support improved coordination and communication. The benefits of learning to use digital tools have been significant, particularly for ensuring work continuity in remote areas.

I had not used digital tools before but learned it under this project. Using technology for communication has been immensely advantageous since the area we cover is vast, and the villages are scattered. Using digital means has proven valuable for enhancing coordination and ensuring that our work was not stopped. (Senior Leader, Samvad)

The transition to adopting digital tools has been gradual, with varying levels of capacity and enthusiasm among staff more accustomed to traditional methods. Although digital tools for storage and intra-office communication are now more commonly used, there is a recognized need to enhance online presence and visibility. Improvements in documentation and the exploration of additional fundraising avenues also underscored the importance of systematizing documentation, monitoring, and planning processes.

Organisationally we do a lot of work but not all the work is visible. We need to increase our online presence and the trainings have been instrumental in improving our proficiency with online tools. But we need to have more creative content and develop communications plans. We are planning to establish a separate communications cell to ensure that all our publications are widely disseminated. (Senior leader, Samvad)

Increased resources for women in the community

Capacity development on the aforementioned themes led to tangible improvements within the organisation. These improvements have translated to increased resources for the community, especially women.

We have begun collecting stories from the field. From these stories, we discerned that women in the community tend to be less informed about government schemes. This insight has led us to organize discussions within communities about available schemes and how they can be accessed. (Senior Leader, Samvad)

After examining reports and conducting focus group discussions related to our livelihood interventions, we opted to facilitate access to agricultural schemes and to introduce mushroom farming to women in the community. This initiative was rolled out across four villages. Recognizing that women found it challenging to attend meetings outside their homes, we arranged for trainers to visit these villages to conduct the training sessions. As a result, over 80 women received training. Now, mushroom cultivation continues in all the villages. (Senior Leader, Samvad)





Social norms and deep structures

Changes in organisational practices

According to interviews with senior leadership, Samvad follows a collective approach to decision-making, which takes into account and respects all viewpoints. However, as observed by the Gender at Work team and facilitators, Samvad's senior leadership continues to exert considerable influence over decision making processes. In this regard, the project has created a space that has enabled senior leadership to better understand the significance of leadership development, including the concept of leadership transition and the cultivation of a second line of leadership to ensure the organisation's long-term sustainability. Samvad has initiated a strategic plan for the development of a second line of leadership and targets individuals aged 45 and below by 2025.

We recognized the need for organisational strengthening with support from Gender at Work. We are committed to continuing our leadership development efforts and may seek technical assistance to review our processes and functions. Much of this guidance has been derived from Gender at Work facilitated meetings. Our growth has been substantial in recent years. (Senior Leader, Samvad)

The concept of nurturing a second tier of leadership is being taken very seriously. Most of our board members are in an older age category, and there are no planned changes until 2025. Our goal is to build the capacity of our internal group to cultivate a cohort of individuals with leadership skills, including women leaders. We have already identified a few for these roles. (Senior Leader, Samvad)

Through leadership development trainings, the project facilitated an exploration of diverse forms of leadership with the goal of showcasing feminist leadership and organizing. This involved an emphasis on creating safe and supportive environments, holding open discussions, and encouraging staff participants to reflect on their personal power and its expression within the organisation during the workshops. This approach yielded changes in two areas: increasing reflexive work practices and building a culture of learning.

Reflexive work practices

Many of the interviewees, especially those in senior leadership and coordinator positions, reported becoming more empathetic, engaging in collective planning, and actively participating in shared problem-solving practices within their teams.





With the trainings, we have become more sensitive to issues faced by our staff and how to accord dignity to everyone. ...This has led to changes in the workplace and in the work environment. I have come to realize the importance of creating a workplace that is welcoming and comfortable for staff.

(Senior Leader, Samvad)

Overall, the workshops provided us with an opportunity to think. It was explained that there was no need to rush. This allowed for in-depth discussions and explanations. We have continued with these practices.

(Community Mobiliser, Samvad)

Decision-making, especially strategy development, used to be the domain of supervisors, project heads, and board members who decided collectively. Field staff were not included previously. However, after undergoing the fund-raising training, they [senior management] realized the importance of field-level input, leading to increased consultations with field staff.

(Field Coordinator, Samvad)
Breaking colonial attitudes in management is crucial. Simultaneously, it is essential to establish infrastructure to facilitate this attitudinal shift. This remains my ongoing commitment.

(Secretary, Samvad)

Building a culture of learning

Through their active participation in workshops and meetings, staff members experienced the value of collaborative work and gained an appreciation for its significance in knowledge sharing and cross-learning within the organisation.

"Many of SAMVAD's staff attended the workshops, and they, in turn, shared their learnings with others in the organisation. This has led to increased cross-learning within the organisation, as all of Samvad's projects were represented in the trainings."

(Secretary, Samvad)

"What I appreciated about the trainings was the emphasis on group work. I was accustomed to planning independently and then instructing my team members. My focus was primarily on my own projects and themes. However, working in groups made me realize the wealth of knowledge one can gain from peers and colleagues."

(Field Coordinator, Samvad)

"Previously, I used to determine field activities and their locations independently. However, I have come to realize that this approach doesn't always lead to successful outcomes. So nowadays, coordinators and field staff plan together. Field staff, being more aware of ground-level realities, positively inform programme planning. We have also begun using monitoring tools to track programme progress, identify weaknesses, and explore strategies for improvement."

(Field Coordinator, Samvad)



Policies, rules and regulations

The project has helped to catalyse strategic planning, as well as deepen understanding of what is necessary for organisational strengthening. Samvad has initiated the development of strategic plans to address gaps in its governance policies and structures. These plans involve undertaking a comprehensive review of the governance structure by 2025. To guide this process, Samvad has established a steering committee and intends to put in place a planning and monitoring cell to streamline project planning processes as well as a separate communication cell. The organisation is also committed to enhancing existing staff capacities and providing them with more growth opportunities, with the objective of establishing a second line of leadership. The development of these policies aligns with the organisation's aspirations to strengthen its structure to support fundraising efforts.

One concrete step taken toward change, which can be attributed to the project's influence, is the increased focus on enhancing gender representation within the organisation.

I have observed some changes in the past four years. We are more conscious of increasing women's representation in Samvad. At the moment, we have gender parity at the field level, with an equal number of women and men serving as field coordinators. We also have recruited women in greater numbers. (Senior Leader, Samvad)

Moreover, Samvad plans to continue improving women's leadership and representation in decision-making processes by recruiting women into senior positions.

*"We would like to continue our partnership with Gender at Work to provide these trainings. We have taken feedback from JATN and Ekjut on effective ways of conducting these trainings to understand what an emerging leadership looks like and ways to improve it."
(Senior Leader, Samvad)*

*"There is a plan to improve women's representation by 2025-26. We also want to build women leaders. We have identified a few for this role already. We will have leadership workshops and implement other changes. We have established a Steering Committee to bring in the changes."
(Senior Leader, Samvad)*

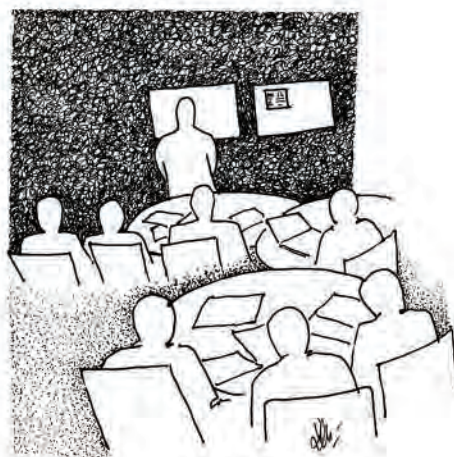


Conclusions

The project focus on individual sensitization, organisational strengthening and community engagement aligned with Samvad's core principles of improving "swa" (self/individual), "sanstha" (organisation) "samaj" (community). This alignment made the project highly relevant. . Notably, the project played a pivotal role in helping Samvad adapt to new resource mobilization models by bolstering its organisational processes and establishing feminist ways of working. This transformation is crucial for ensuring long-term sustainability.

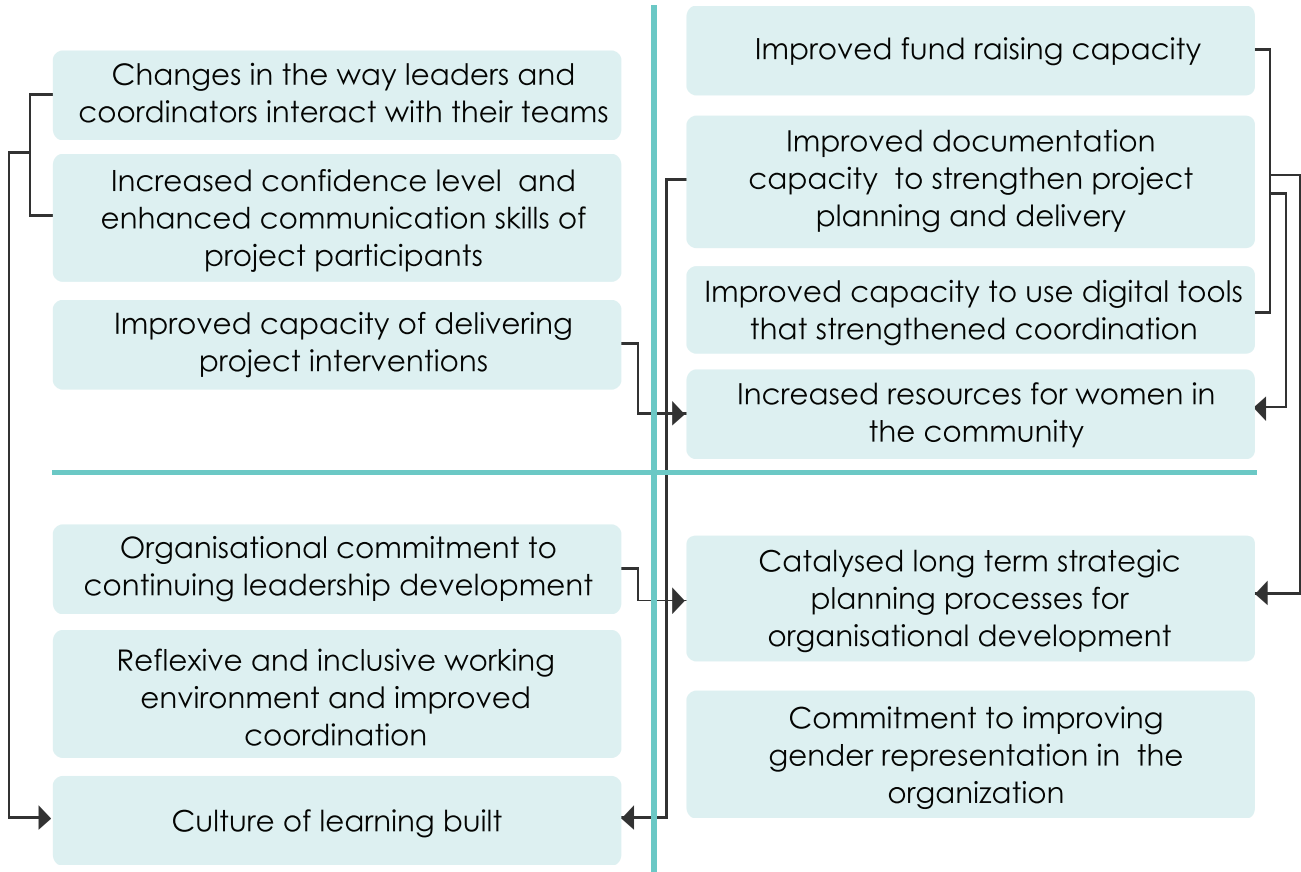
On reflecting on the project's journey, some elements stood out as particularly effective. First among these was the project's adaptability and responsiveness. A deliberate effort was made to co-design workshops so that project interventions aligned with the specific needs and expectations of Samvad. One highly effective method employed was the use of 'before-action reviews' and 'after-action reviews' with Samvad staff to assess each training session's outcomes and plan for the next. This approach facilitated the documentation and management of expectations. Moreover, it provided Samvad staff with the opportunity to critically evaluate their expectations, ensuring they remained realistic. By scrutinizing their expectations of the workshops, Samvad was better able to identify its organisational capacity development needs in areas such as digital tools, fundraising, and documentation. The second standout element was the participatory pedagogies used during the workshop, which introduced participants to tools that enhanced participatory and inclusive ways of working.

The impact of project efforts was most tangible in 'Resources and opportunities'. Samvad's enhanced fundraising capacity, coupled with improved documentation and proficiency with online tools, complemented one another seamlessly. They facilitated better coordination, improved programme design and implementation, ensured programme continuity in remote areas, and amplified resources available to support women's empowerment in the field. Moreover, the project succeeded in elevating the individual capacities of Samvad's staff, by increasing their confidence levels and improving their communication skills. In turn, these improvements translated into reflexive work practices, and enhanced collaboration and knowledge sharing among team members.





The emergent causal pathways can be presented as below:



Formalizing organisational development processes, such as leadership transition plans and inclusive policies, remains a work in progress. The project has successfully catalysed this change process. Strategic plans have been initiated, setting the stage for Samvad's continued growth and development. Notably, the project's influence has been instrumental in intensifying Samvad's focus on improving gender representation within the organisation, particularly in decision making roles. Efforts to recruit more women into senior positions and provide leadership development trainings to women underscore Samvad's commitment to advancing gender equality both within the organisation and in its broader mission.

In reflecting on the project's challenges, two key issues emerged. First, the lack of sufficient buy-in from senior leadership to address all aspects of organisational development precluded a comprehensive organisational transformation. This gap was particularly evident in the failure to establish methods for encouraging a second line of leadership or facilitating leadership transitions. Instead of seizing the opportunities presented by the project to take concrete steps in this direction, these actions were deferred as part of a long-term learning process rather than an immediate priority.

Second, given the context in which Samvad was operating, emerging from the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the staff faced heavy workloads as they tried to make up for lost time. Consequently, engaging in intensive capacity development during the post pandemic stage proved difficult. This resulted in different staff members attending various training sessions, impeding the establishment of a cohesive cohort of change facilitators. Furthermore, due to the numerous demands on their time, there were issues of absenteeism and inconsistent participation at workshops.





Despite these challenges, the project underscored the significance of a holistic and adaptive approach, incorporating feminist methods and mixed group dynamics to foster comprehensive learning and transformation. It also highlighted the essential role of senior leadership buy-in for catalyzing organisational change and for amplifying the effectiveness of capacity development initiatives.

Finally, the crucial stewardship role played by the Gender at Work team deserves acknowledgement. The team was instrumental in customizing workshops and trainings to meet Samvad's unique needs, offering unwavering support especially during the pandemic. Their accessibility created an environment for open communication, enabling staff to express grievances and collaborate effectively. The inclusion of young women in the team enhanced this dynamic and fostered a diverse and inclusive atmosphere. The Gender at Work team's adaptability, deep engagement, and commitment were central to overcoming challenges and achieving the project's goals.

Key Lessons Learnt


- 1 Holistic Approach:** Adopting a comprehensive systems perspective in training design and delivery led to more effective and impactful outcomes.
- 2 Feminist Methods:** Employing discursive, inclusive, and safe space strategies proved highly effective in conveying lessons and transforming work practices toward inclusivity, empathy, and participation.
- 3 Mixed Groups Dynamics:** Carefully selecting participants for workshops, ensuring a mix of senior and junior staff members, facilitated greater engagement and peer learning.
- 4 Adaptability:** Flexibility is crucial; pivoting in response to resistance and addressing actual needs is essential for successful capacity development.
- 5 Senior Leadership Buy-In:** the project demonstrated the importance of securing commitment and involvement of senior leadership for comprehensive organisational transformation.







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