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# ADDRESSING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19

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**STORIES OF CHANGE FROM ONE STOP CENTRES**

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# MS. SOUMYA SAHU'S STORY AS A ONE STOP CENTRE ADMINISTRATOR

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**About me and my role:** Namaste. I am Soumya Sahu, and I work at Sakhi, the One Stop Centre (OSC) in Cuttack, Odisha. I have always been motivated to work for the welfare of women and girls in distress. We receive about 20-25 survivors of violence each month at our centre. I try to engage with the survivors, listen to them and understand their stories, counsel them, and ensure that centre staff are able to provide them with all the necessary care and support.

**About our centre:** At our centre we have three counsellors and a provision of five beds to support survivors, if they need accommodation for a short period. We have developed strong linkages with the police, the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), shelter homes in our district, and the district level child welfare committees. These linkages help us in responding to the different needs that survivors may have. We also work to ensure that people learn about the services available at the centre. So, my staff and I go regularly to schools, colleges, nursing institutes and in community neighbourhoods where we interact with people and conduct awareness generation sessions on addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV).

**GBV and COVID-19:** Unfortunately, violence against women has not ceased during this crisis. We kept our centre open and continued providing services even during the lockdown. In the month of June early one morning, one of our staff members received a call from a woman seeking help for her daughter who had to be rescued and taken for immediate medical aid, due to domestic violence. The survivor had been experiencing a lot of violence from her in-laws who were pressuring her and her family to pay dowry. On that particular day, the violence escalated, and the survivor sustained a severe head injury and fractures in her hand. On receiving the call, our centre staff immediately sprung to action, and admitted the survivor to a hospital. We then followed up to work with her family and ensure that a case was registered against her in-laws.

In the initial period of the lockdown the situation was quite challenging for us, as all means of transport were severely curtailed. However, the situation has eased now and we continue to make our best effort to ensure that every call that we receive from survivors or their family members is attended to immediately.

**Training provided by UNFPA:** The series of trainings by UNFPA were useful for all of us, in enhancing our knowledge on the relevant legislations related to women. We also learnt about providing psychosocial counselling to survivors. We will use the information in our outreach sessions with community members.



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# MS. MADHUCHHANDA'S STORY AS A ONE STOP CENTRE ADMINISTRATOR

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**About me and my role:** Namaste! My name is Madhuchhanda and I am the Centre Administrator at the Sakhi One Stop Centre (OSC) in Dhenkanal District Hospital (Odisha). I have been associated with the Centre since its inception on August 15, 2019. The motivation to do something for women in distress and ensure that they have access to justice makes me push myself to work tirelessly and selflessly especially during these challenging times.

**About our centre:** The Centre receives around 20 new and 30 follow-up cases every month. For each new client, services are provided based on their specific requirements. Our counsellors are trained to assess the survivors' support systems and make them aware of their rights and entitlements. The training and resource materials provided by UNFPA have further honed their skills to provide emotional support, share relevant information and encourage survivors to make their own decisions regarding the course of action they wish to pursue.

The Centre undertakes outreach sessions with Women's Self Help Groups (SHGs) and with college students through Anganwadis (rural childcare centres). With college students, we have conducted sessions on eve teasing and stalking; and with SHGs on rights under the 'Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act'. We have also conducted sessions on the issue of child marriage, dowry and legal remedies available to women.

**Responding to Abuse Against the Elderly during Covid-19:** The Centre continued to function during the lockdown. One time, we received a call from a man who had reached out to seek help on behalf of his mother. He reported that due to the lockdown he was stuck in the city and couldn't return home. His 60-year-old widowed mother who lived in the village with his wife was being ill-treated and denied food. He had tried to speak to his wife, but the ill treatment and violence escalated rather than diminishing. Not knowing where to seek help from, the man said that he was contacting us as a last resort so that we could intervene urgently to protect his mother.

The Sakhi OSC promptly provided telephonic psychosocial counselling to the abused elderly woman. This was during the Phase 1 of lockdown and there were strict restrictions on movement. We contacted the local police station to provide assistance to the elderly lady. After assessing the situation, the police admonished the daughter-in-law about ill-treating her mother-in-law. We have been following up every 15 days with the survivor to enquire about her well-being. Her son and daughter-in-law now live with her and there has been no untoward incident since our intervention.



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## MS. SALONI'S STORY AS A CRISIS CENTRE COUNSELLOR

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**About me and my role:** Hello, I am Saloni Rawat. I work as a counsellor at the Sakhi Centre (One Stop Center) in Jaipur, Rajasthan. There are three other counsellors at the centre and we work in shifts of eight hours each, ensuring that the centre remains functional 24X7. I joined the centre ten months back, in January 2020, and this job has created a deep impression on me. Our centre receives a high caseload of about 50-60 clients each month. The fact that I am able to be of any help to survivors, inspires me a great deal. I believe that every woman should be able to lead a life free from violence.

**About our centre:** Our centre has an administrator, empanelled advocates and police staff who are deputed round the clock. We have two beds to support short-stay for survivors who want it. We have developed strong linkages with the local Government hospital and shelter homes in the area.

**About my role:** I try to understand the survivor's needs and counsel her based on that. We also try to counsel couples; however, I have seen that it is extremely difficult for women to get their husbands to come to the centre for counselling. In extreme circumstances, we summon partners who are abusive through the local police stations. In my view, the most important part of counselling is the follow up. As part of our centre's policy, I follow up with each survivor till I am assured of her safety.

**GBV and COVID-19:** Providing services during the lockdown was challenging. One day we received a call from a young woman who complained that her brothers were ill-treating her 70-year-old mother. The woman reported that her mother currently lived with the sons, who were abusing her and even denying her basic essentials such as food. On receiving this report, we contacted the local police, informed them about the case, and formed a team. The team visited the elderly woman's house where we spoke to her and asked about her welfare. We also counselled her family, and let them know that we will be following up regularly. We made good on our commitment, and have been calling the woman to speak to her on a weekly basis. This regular follow-up has ensured that the woman is now being taken care of by her family.

**Training provided by UNFPA:** As this was my first employment, I had to do a lot of learning on the job. I attended a series of training programmes organized by UNFPA and I found them extremely useful; I learnt about different aspects of the laws related to addressing GBV. We used the information shared in the training to make posters and displayed them at the centre.





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Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 2017: One Stop Centre Scheme, Implementation Guidelines for State Governments/UT Administrations. "One Stop Centres (OSCs) are intended to support women affected by violence, in private and public spaces, within the family, community and at the workplace. Women facing physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and economic abuse, irrespective of age, class, caste, education status, marital status, race and culture will be facilitated with support and redressal. Aggrieved women facing any kind of violence due to attempted sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic violence, trafficking, honour related crimes, acid attacks or witch-hunting who have reached out or been referred to the OSC will be provided with specialized services".