UN Women South Asia is pleased to present the fifth e-newsletter. This issue brings you inspirational stories of women from across India.

• Lighting up lives
• Policy measures for women’s migration
• Expanding jobs for rural women in India
• Government of Rajasthan supports women’s assemblies
Story 1

Lighting up lives

Twenty women, recruited from the districts of Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar, were part of the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) Bank’s first group of “Energy Conservators” in the Urja Bachat Sathis project. Within a short span of nine months, the Energy Conservators visited 1,800 households in Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar, and convinced 220 households to adopt energy-efficient measures for cooking and lighting, having a ripple effect on the lives of women, who are the primary workers in their house. By changing their lighting, ventilation and cooking methods, the households, on average per month, have increased savings by 21% and decreased energy consumption by 20%.

Participants ask questions during the SEWA training.
Photo credit: UN Women/Gaganjit Singh

Sabinaben Sabirbhai, an Energy Conservator, on a visit to a house in the slums to train women about various ©UN Women/Gaganjit Singh

For more photos click here ►
Read the full story ►
Story 2

Policy measures for women’s migration

Several policy measures were adopted by the Government of India in favour of women migrating abroad for work due to media coverage about a report by UN Women and the VV Giri Institute for Labour. The report, Migration of Women Workers from South Asia to the Gulf, highlights the abuse and vulnerability faced by women who migrate to the Gulf in the absence of strong policy measures to protect them.

The media coverage reached out to almost 28 million readers of leading newspapers in India. As a result, the Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs decided to review and amend a clause in the Emigration Act 1983 lowering the age of women migrating overseas for employment from 30 years to 21 years. This is an important achievement since younger women often falsify documents to migrate and this puts them at risk of abuse and exploitation by employers. The Minister has also directed senior officials to form a high level committee to enable dialogue on policies to better manage the migration of women for work. Such a response will benefit women migrant workers and enable closer cooperation between India and the Gulf.

36-year-old Pakhi Begum lives in Narayan Gonj in Bangladesh

Her past: To earn good money, Pakhi went to Dubai to work as a maid. But a Bangladeshi agent cheated her by “selling” her to an agent in Dubai. As a result, she had no salary—not even proper food and rest. After a few months of working very hard, she fell ill. Pakhi was then sent to Bangladesh without a single penny.

Her present: Pakhi is now working as a tailor’s assistant and has joined hands with an NGO and UN Women partner OKUP that works with exploited migrant women. She uses counseling to help other women migrate safely.

Photo credit: UN Women/Anindit Roy Chowdhury
Story 3

Expanding jobs for rural women in India

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) is the world’s biggest employment programme that guarantees 100 days of paid employment per year to rural households. Due to lack of awareness, scheduled caste women are ignorant of the Act. To remedy this, UN Women, with support from the Fund for Gender Equality, increased women’s right to employment under the Act in eight districts of Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh between 2009 and 2011.

A recent evaluation showed a five-fold increase in the number of Dalit women who had access to work under MNREGA in 102 villages. Innovative strategies like all-women worksites and trained women supervisors have enhanced the participation and leadership of 14,000 women under this scheme. The programme has also increased women’s control over earnings and decision-making—3,500 bank accounts have been created in the names of Dalit women.

To help Dalit women learn about their employment rights, Gender at Work and Sahjani Shiksha Kendra published a training manual using such cartoons.

Read more:
Expanding jobs for rural women in India ►
Enhancing livelihood security for Dalit women ►
UN Women’s partnership with the State Government of Rajasthan has made mahila sabha meetings or women’s assemblies mandatory in three districts of Rajasthan. The government’s decision was the result of discussions during a State Project Steering Meeting convened by UN Women. These meetings are held regularly as part of UN Women’s Governance Programme in India to enable interaction with key policy makers and officials on policies related to women’s political empowerment.

The mahila sabha is a meeting held only for women so they can learn more about useful public schemes and voice their problems. The women who attend the mahila sabhas are then encouraged to participate in the larger gram sabha or public village meeting that are meant to inform villagers about development schemes and address their concerns. By holding mahila sabhas, more women are participating and raising issues on violence, livelihoods, drinking water, access to fuel wood and entitlements under different social schemes.

The mahila sabhas are being held currently in three districts where UN Women is working – Alwar, Dungarpur and Tonk. Once such sabha was held in June in Kanba Gram Panchayat of Dungarpur where
almost 50 gathered women got useful information about different services offered by the government for women. Vimala Devi, an aanganwadi representative, spoke about six key services provided through aanganwadi’s or integrated child development centres. “We provide nutritious diet and necessary injections to pregnant women, infants and children up to the age of 3 years,” she said.

The challenge ahead would be to convince the legislators to amend the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act making the mahila sabha a pre-requisite for gram sabhas in all districts.

Pinky Devi, elected head of village
Sarpanch Pinky Devi listens attentively to a villager attending the special Gram Sabha. Kabza Gram Panchayat, District Dungarpur, Rajasthan

Photo credit: UN Women/Gaganjit Singh