

# Human Rights Center Fellows: dispatch from the field



*A women's agricultural group working with Nari Gunjan in India.*

## **Working with Nari Gunjan (Women's Voice), India**

*The mission of the Nari Gunjan in Bihar State in India is to socio-politically, economically, and physically empower the Scheduled caste girls and women, particularly the Musahar, through the medium of education. Founded in 1987 by Sudha Varghese, the organization is providing elementary education as well as vocational and life skills training to over 3,000 girls at alternative educational centers in 40 villages. Woojin is assisting Nari Gunjan in*

creating a rights-based monitoring and evaluation framework to determine the developmental and human rights impact of the program.

“The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled.”

**Excerpt from Woojin Jung’s report from the field:**

In 1987, Sudha, who was from a prosperous family in Kerala, moved to a cluster of mud houses in Jamsaut village in Bihar and began helping the Musahar. A Musahar girl, Lalmati, lived in the same village where Sudha had settled. Her family was the poorest of the poor, living in a deplorable situation. They lived in a small hut in *tolla* (Musahar Settlement). Because her parents were older, nobody would give them work. So her mother collected paddy and grains while her father went to fish with a fishing rod. They also grew vegetables, ate, and sold the rest.

For some reason, Lalmati was older than her classmates. When she came back home from school, she had much work to do. She cut rice, cooked food for her family, took care of the elderly and young brothers and sisters, and fed goats and cows. By the time she finished all the household chores, it was already evening. She could not afford a lantern, so ran to Sudha *didi* (big sister)’s house. There, she studied by the light of a bulb.

Late in the evening, most of the families in her community came to talk with Sudha about their struggles—from sexual violence, to minimum wages, caste issues, tensions between next *tola*, and health problems. Lalmati spent much time listening to Sudha and developed different ways of looking at her surroundings. After all the families left, Sudha shared her dinner with Lamati, who would then fall asleep.

In 1987, Sudha converted a latrine into a classroom in her village, and launched a learning center for adolescent girls. The center provided alternative education for children who were left out of the formal education system. At first Sudha taught the girls, but later could not teach them because she was starting education centers in other villages.

Teachers hired from outside the community did not come on time and did not want to sit close to the children from the Musahar, who were in the lowest rung of the caste system. Facing discrimination similar to what they experienced in public schools, the children were reluctant to come to the center. So, Sudha had to change teachers two or three times.

Looking at Lalmati, Sudha thought, “Why don’t I give her a chance?” and asked her, “Can you teach? I can pay you exactly what I pay for the teacher.” With Lalmati from the same Musahar community, children felt at home and did not miss classes. She received 750 rupees per month and saved the money to take care of her parents.

With Nari Gunjan’s program, many Musahar girls started to become more passionate about being educated and even getting jobs. Still, child marriage remains a crippling cause of poor enrollment and attainment in girls’ education. Parents fear that when their daughters get older they will not find a suitable boy and that the more educated their daughters, the more *dowry* their in-laws will demand.

Lalmati is the first girl to complete the secondary school and became employed at the government school. As a teacher and a mother of two, she demonstrates the ripple effect of education by sharing her knowledge and experience with the next generation, and by helping young people to achieve an equal right to education. On the wall of Prerna hostel, it says “The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled.” She clearly sets an example.



Andrea Lampros / July 27, 2016