

**Planting seeds of change in India:  
How communal gardening and nutrition trainings improve nutrition security for women and young children and transform gender roles**

Achieving food and nutrition security is intricately linked to gender equality. The Indo-German project '[Securing Nutrition, Enhancing Resilience \(SENU\) – India](#)' implemented in collaboration with the Indian Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) is part of the special initiative "Transformation of Agricultural and Food Systems" by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The project aims to improve the nutritional situation of women of reproductive age (15-49 years) and small children (6-23 months) in six districts of the states of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra in India. According to the OECD-DAC's classification, **gender equality is an important secondary objective of SENU (GG1)**.

SENU implements a Social Behaviour Change (SBC) driven integrated approach linking nutrition trainings and paid work in community nutrition gardens. The project trains more than 10,000 female Anganwadi workers (government frontline workers) in counselling families on nutrition, food production and hygiene practices through regular Nutrition Participatory Learning and Action (N-PLA) trainings for pregnant and lactating women, fathers, adolescents, and extended family members such as the elderly. The trainings are linked with women-led Community Nutrition Gardens (CNGs) to improve access and availability of nutritious food at household and community level. The CNGs engage landless women from vulnerable communities who are organised in women collectives, so-called self-help groups (SHGs) comprising 10-15 women. The SHGs develop and maintain the CNGs and receive wages for their work through the governmental Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Hence, CNGs not only improve the access and availability of a variety of healthy foods but also diversify sources of income through paid work under MGNREGS along with the sale of surplus vegetable and fruit produce.

**1. Promoting gender equality within the program / sector (40% of marks)**

At the end of the first phase (2015-2020) of the project, improvements in nutrition outcomes were observed, yet deeply rooted gender role divisions that manifest in lack of engagement by men and other family members in nutrition still constituted a main challenge to lasting impact. Informed by [research about gender norms and practices](#), SENU developed a comprehensive gender-transformative approach (GTA). The approach focuses on **changing attitudes and perceptions of gender roles and stereotypes on nutrition, food production and childcare at all levels (individual, family, community)** with specific interventions that target women livelihoods, engagement of men in nutrition and household chores, engaging with community leaders, etc. The approach is streamlined across SENU's activities and focuses on change processes that extend beyond simply involving women as a target group or participants but actively support their economic empowerment and at the same time by engaging men in nutrition and childcare activities deliberately. To conceptualise its gender-transformative approach, SENU drew on the '**Quadrants of Change for Empowerment**' which is a holistic model addressing transformative change from four angles: individual, relational, cultural and systemic/structures.

The project now **involves men in tailor-made nutrition participatory trainings and gender theatre performances** that **challenge traditional views of masculinity** and showcase more caring and involved husbands and fathers. In SBC-driven N-PLA trainings parents **jointly learn** about child feeding, dietary diversity, and gender roles. The meetings have influenced the power dynamics, responsibilities, and decision-making autonomy (**relational level**) of more than 150,000 women and their households in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra where more than 25,000 men and 30,000 grandparents actively involve in childcare and child nutrition. The trainings also engage influential norm holders, such as traditional leaders, agricultural and health extension workers, local authorities, and members of legal structures.



Community cooking event with men



Woman harvesting CNG produce

A main result of the project is the **systematic scaling of a model of women-led multisectoral CNGs** through MGNREGS, which is one of the world’s largest social protection schemes. This CNG initiative leveraged more than **6.5 Mio. EUR** through MGNREGS by providing wages, fencing and essential agricultural inputs such as seeds, plant saplings, irrigation systems, and manure to SHGs. In Madhya Pradesh, CNGs are now scaled by the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development in all districts, facilitating **systemic change**. To date, 1,372 CNGs have provided nutritious food and livelihood to 16,000 women and their families. The project not only contributed to improved nutrition but also supported women empowerment at **individual level** through increased self-belief and agency as well as through providing further income opportunities and social recognition (**relational level**). Anita Bai Shiv, SHG woman, shared that *“earlier I used to wonder why I was born at all if I don’t have anything. But now it feels good that I can do a lot. Being part of this initiative [CNG] makes me feel that I can touch the sky”*. Another SHG woman Rajkumari Renuka emphasises that *“people at home appreciates us, and we are starting to get respect from people in the village”*.

The project also addresses gender transformation at **cultural level** through a **comprehensive campaign focusing on #MenCare** using street art and participatory and community-based street theatres promoting **parents as a team** and highlighting their joint responsibility of childcare and nutrition. It has reached around 9,000 community members in Madhya Pradesh. Bhagsingh Songhara, a man who participated in the street-theatre shared in the reflection: *“Just like two wheels are required for stability, similarly husband and wife should share equal love, care and responsibility for a happy and healthy family”*. Another male participant, Sonaji More Devrikhurda mentioned, *“husband and wife should go together to the market and should decide together about buying food and materials for the household.”*



Men are becoming more involved in care and nutrition of their small children

Furthermore, the project intentionally included capacity building on GTA of implementing partners, field executives and SHG members through **‘Gender Makes Nutrition Sense trainings’** (adapted and contextualised from GIZ’s “Gender Makes Business Sense”) to sensitise and reflect on division of

workload, gender roles and responsibilities for child nutrition, childcare and food production. The described integrated approach of SENU considers intersectionality, i.e., linkages between identities that may reinforce discrimination, by focusing on rural, landless, indigenous/ethnic (incl. people



Community Dialogues to understand women's and men's daily chores.

belonging to different tribes and castes) women of reproductive age and their families. One example from Bhil community of Lafangao, Barwani district, Madhya Pradesh shows that agriculture was limited to cereals and cash crops (Monoculture). Through the CNG trainings, the community revived their indigenous practice of saving seeds for the next season, natural pesticides and manure formulation, production of uncultivated fruits and vegetables along with millets.

Although the primary objective of the project's second phase is to improve the nutritional situation of 280,000 women and

56,000 children through the nutrition-sensitive integrated approach, **additional positive outcomes** regarding changed gender roles and responsibilities on nutrition, food production and childcare within families, the community, and frontline workers can already be observed. Further, women empowerment is an important additional positive outcome in the medium and long term. By collaboratively streamlining gender-transformative actions within nutrition activities, the project aspires to influence political partners to adopt and champion this nutrition-sensitive integrated approach. Thereby the project contributes to nutritional security for women and young children (SDG 2) as well as to gender equality (SDG 5), to better health (SDG 3) in the long term.

## 2. Gender as a quality feature of our work (20% of marks)

The project has strategically used GTA as a quality feature even before BMZ announced its Feminist Development Policy. The DV of the project regarded gender equality as her responsibility in the project management and took inspiration from the SNRD Africa's Gender Transformative Leadership Coaching. Therefore, SENU's approach **was among the first GTA examples of a BMZ collection** to substantiate and advance the policy. The project's results have also been published on the [BMZ.DE website](#). Beyond appreciation by the commissioning party, national partners have taken up the project's GTA approach by **allocating resources from existing social protection schemes** to support women-led CNGs. The project's nutrition-sensitive integrated approach is also **reflected in the Department of Women and Child Development's State Social and Behaviour Change strategy (Vol I and Vol II)**, focusing on pillars of women empowerment, child protection, and nutrition & health. The project's recognition by partners through local media and films contributes to its visibility and underscores the shared commitment to fostering gender equality and nutrition security.

## 3. Implementing feminist core principles (20% of marks)

The feminist core principles of the German federal government, emphasising human rights-based, gender-transformative, intersectional, post-colonial, and power-critical approaches, play a pivotal role in shaping the project's strategies. Through the CNGs, the project actively contributes to the targeted dismantling of structural causes for inequality, offering SHG members **enhanced bargaining power, strengthened decision-making abilities, and an amplified voice in local councils**. Further, through SENU's participatory nutrition trainings that follow adult learning principles, the project is **raising awareness about rights and entitlements to existing social protection schemes** and thereby

facilitates access to safe and nutritious food, aligning with the SDGs. In line with post-colonial and power-critical approaches, SENU also adopted the Positive Deviance (PD) approach. The motto “people are not empty vessels” assumes that in every community, there are people who have found ways to overcome their challenges with their own solutions that do not require any additional resources. **This is a shift in perspective from the paradigm of introducing expert solutions from outside.** A study by SENU to discover uncommon practices among families with well-nourished mothers and young children revealed gender-related aspects. These included parents eating together, meaning the mother does not eat last, practicing joint decision-making, e.g., in family planning, or having a higher marriage age compared to others. Moreover, **PD families had more involved fathers practicing conscious financial planning to ensure good nutrition for mother and children, attaining knowledge about good nutrition, or feeding the child in the morning before work.** The reflection with the community showed willingness for adoption and dissemination of most practices.



Positive Deviant father who is very knowledgeable and invested in nutrition and wellbeing of his girl child

#### 4. Cooperation (20% of marks)

Gender equality and women empowerment are a common objective under the national nutrition strategy, Mission Poshan 2.0., which focuses on multisectoral strategies to overcome malnutrition (SDG 1 and 2), as well as addressing Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) and menstrual hygiene (SDG 3 and 6) and gender equality (SDG 5). Under this common objective, the project worked closely with government partners, academia, and civil society. Through an **SBC/gender implementation award competition**, SENU brought together implementation partners to jointly advance SBC and gender activities at local level. The project has also contributed to **peer-to-peer learning** within GIZ India through the GTA Cluster Working Group. The project was also instrumental in setting up a Task Force under the Sector Network Rural Development (SNRD) Asia-Pacific which facilitated learnings about GTA among GIZ projects in the region and published [Learning Together: Toolkit on GTA in Rural Development](#) in 2023. Moreover, the project drew inspiration from the “Gender makes Business Sense (GmBS)” training developed by the GIZ project Agricultural Technical Vocational Education and Training for Women (ATVET4W). In partnership with MANAGE, an Indian government body on agricultural extension, GmBS was contextualised for the rural Indian context and implemented with the project’s partners, Welthungerhilfe and local NGOs. A challenge was the limited knowledge and common understanding of GTA among partners and staff that affected implementation. However, **three key success factors** were identified: Firstly, **intentionally and consistently building gender competence** at all levels that supported joint commitment and ownership, especially of government partners. Secondly, **actively involving and addressing men in nutrition and gender trainings** proved essential in enhancing joint responsibility for family nutrition. Lastly, **adopting an evidence-based SBC and gender strategy** supported a comprehensive operationalisation of GTA interventions.