

## Gender Policy - Samaj Pragati Sahayog

### 1. Introduction

Samaj Pragati Sahayog's gender policy derives from being rooted in some of the most deprived regions of the Central India Adivasi belt. The marginalised communities who live here face extreme discrimination in multiple, interconnected ways, within which the situation of women becomes acute. SPS is a grassroots organisation working in remote, drought-prone, predominantly tribal hinterlands of Dewas and Khargone districts, as well as in the Melghat region of Maharashtra.

Women and adolescent girls in our area suffer exploitation and discrimination at home, on their farms and in the labour market every day. They spend long hours working - gathering head loads of wood or fodder, sowing, weeding, harvesting on unyielding land, collecting forest produce, milking cows, making cow-dung cakes to burn, repairing homes, emptying cattle shed waste into compost pits, making rope – breaking their backs on some kind of economic activity to ensure survival; which is unseen unpaid and unacknowledged. This is apart from the time they spend earning wages as bonded or migrant labour at jobs in agriculture, factories, construction work sites. Added to this are the hours spent in their traditional responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, bearing and looking after children. The average number of children born to women in this area are more than 5 and the number of pregnancies, more than 6. Of the crimes against women these are the worst – to be destined as prisoners of poverty and discrimination, from which there is no escape. In these areas most of the female workforce is engaged in agricultural activities, very few women own agricultural land or any form of property or asset.

The injustice is devastating if one considers that women have been historically disinherited from the ownership of resources, of which the most important is land, by a legal system, which is still complicated, contradictory, and confused between customary, coded, statutory and personal laws.

Institutional structures and policies systematically exclude women, particularly those in marginalized communities, from economic, political, and social participation.

Yet, women radiate positivity, intelligence, endurance, stamina and most of all determination to overcome, in spite of all odds. They endow society with well-being, like a powerhouse - an invisible energy without which life would come to a halt. In our experience, it is women who show a steadfast commitment to the well-being of communities.

## **2. Commitment**

In order to address these systemic and intersectional injustices that women of our area are subject to, the Gender Policy of SPS seeks to mainstream gender into the work of SPS apart from making it central in the functioning of the organization. At the heart of SPS's work is a gender transformative approach whereby we are committed to leading all interventions through women - from water security to livelihoods, from participating in markets to engaging with the state and advocating for social change.

SPS's resolve is to enable women's agency and influence to ensure their active involvement in envisioning, guiding and decision making in the development of the region to change the practice of power within the social, economic and political institutions we engage with.

We believe that this can be achieved simultaneously by the economic empowerment of women, and by supporting women's institutions for leadership.

**Economic Empowerment** - It is vital for women to be free of life-threatening struggles to make ends meet. Decent paid work and economic security is a human right. Only when women are free from the endless struggle to survive can they take part in social transformation. The economic empowerment of women through alternative, equitable, and sustainable livelihoods is critical - to weather the uncertainty of survival from dwindling agricultural and natural resources, and from patriarchal risk. It is also necessary to establish, account for and rewrite women's invisible economic contribution as producers and workers.

**Women's Institutions** – To break the silence and isolation of women, to amplify their voices, to create a space for understanding and sharing, to build solidarity, it is important

to bring women together. Strong institutions of women give a necessary voice to the development process. The powerful presence of thousands of women collectively bringing in their financial strength to participate in the market, or standing together to hold governments accountable, to push for social change, shifts the balance of power significantly.

**Mobilising a Local Cadre** - To blur the edges between the organization and the area, we must dream that one day there will be women and men who will be the voice and the conscience of their people. Who will speak of and ensure harmony and justice, who will take our work forward, even when we are not there. Who will address deprivations, urge people to access, share and conserve resources. Who will run to help the helpless first. And bring people together so that the spirit of serving and embracing the other abides.

It is our commitment to mobilise and empower a local cadre to support the women's institutions as an important step towards building a self-reliant and self-sustaining system. We believe that by investing in the capacities of young people, who have a stake in the development of the area, enduring teams can be formed who can assist and facilitate the many functions that SPS and Women's Institutions need to perform. Since they belong to the area they have a deep understanding of the issues and challenges that such a task faces. But the most important reason for nurturing a local cadre is that we must restore to them the opportunities that they have been denied – education, equality, livelihoods. We imagine the local cadre of young girls and boys as 'Mitaans', or friends of the people.

**Capacity Building** - Strengthening women's institutions over time to assume the leadership role in shaping development policy and making the state accountable to the poor involves capacity building sessions with the leadership and local cadre on various issues and themes relating to development of their area. Moreover, to instill confidence in women, who have been traditionally and historically excluded from any decision-making process, to interact with the local government and other elected representatives is a huge responsibility that needs to be a continuous process. In our experience the most defining transformations happen while engaging with immediate challenges. A very important part of capacity building is to be present to help and support women while they are trying to

reform a system and during the live process itself, particularly in the art of negotiation and strategy, in collaboration and in finding solutions.

**A Gender Aware Organisation** - As an organisation working in remote rural areas most of the staff from the local area and other places are men. SPS constantly grapples with gender issues and dynamics in day-to-day life within the organisation. In this process of learning and unlearning, SPS's gender perspective is an ever-evolving practice that strives to be compassionate, informed and inclusive. It is our view that feminism is not anti-men but its anti-discrimination. We see men as equal partners in the struggle against patriarchy and sexism. We feel that it is imperative for men to be involved in the creation of a gender just society.

### **3. Scope**

The SPS Gender Policy applies to all staff, volunteers, interns, women's institutions associated with Samaj Pragati Sahayog, as well as collaborating partners, stakeholders and communities that SPS is engaged with.

### **4. Counteracting Gender-Based Discrimination and Harassment**

SPS condemns every form of gendered violence and strives to provide a safe working environment to its staff and community resource persons. We further recognise how gender diverse identities are rendered vulnerable and disadvantaged in a patriarchal society. Therefore, discrimination rooted in gender, whether explicit or implicit, is prohibited in all aspects of our work.

We have an active comprehensive policy for the prevention of sexual harassment, including physical, verbal and non-verbal harassment.

Any incident of gender-based discrimination or harassment can be confidentially reported to the designated Complaints Committee. We are committed to handling the complaints sensitively and in accordance with the organisation's complaint resolution and redressal protocol.

Support for survivors of gender-based violence will involve working closely with the local community and organisations to provide shelter, legal support, and counselling. This help

will be designed to meet specific needs of the person while paying careful attention to the region's cultural sensitivities and socio-political context.

## **5. Achieving Gender Balance**

SPS aspires to challenge and dismantle gender bias, stereotypes and social norms that limit women's potential. SPS continuously endeavours to correct the gender balance within the organisation. We uphold an inclusionary hiring process wherein no discrimination is practised on the grounds of sex, religion, caste, ability, age, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, employment, socio-economic status, or HIV status. On the contrary, preference is given to women applicants and applicants belonging to marginalised groups and identities to redress the historical and systemic discrimination. There is further emphasis on recruiting women from the local area and building their capacities to take up different roles in the organisation as community resource persons.

Of those who join SPS from other places, women candidates find it hard to give a long-term commitment. Keeping these factors in mind, SPS is especially concerned towards making the work environment and conditions encouraging for women. We take extra effort in making the recruitment process fair and transparent. This is done by inviting women applicants to the area so that they fully understand the challenges and demands of working in this region before they make a commitment. The new employees are then introduced to the culture, ethos, work and values of the organisation. To enable an easier transition- food and accommodation is provided to the new employees until they figure out an independent set up for themselves. SPS provides support to their employees throughout and ensures that the stay and travel is safe and comfortable, especially for women.

SPS has created frameworks and policies that recognise and promote women's needs, rights and freedom within the organisation. We emphasize the importance of increasing the representation of women and other underrepresented genders in leadership positions and decision-making processes.

The Gender and Inclusivity Programme at SPS organises regular trainings that promote understanding of gender, gender based violence and discrimination for both - staff and local communities. It provides education and resources to both men and women team

members on sexual, menstrual and reproductive health, rights, and justice through community led interactive sessions. Thus, facilitating teamwork and a deeper, empathetic understanding of each other.

## **6. Gender Audit**

SPS will set up mechanisms to study the impact of the training and initiatives taken towards promoting gender equality and equity. It will hold accountability and ensure transparency in the monitoring, evaluation and reporting of these initiatives. Resources for gender and inclusion will be part of the annual operational plans and budgets.

- A Working Committee on Gender will be created to identify and understand existing gender patterns and gaps in the organisation. The committee will then work on addressing concerns and challenges that may arise concerning the organisational culture towards gender minorities.
- Internal gender audits will be conducted annually to assess progress and identify areas for improvement in the organisation.
- Regular team meetings and trainings will be conducted to reiterate and check the alignment of all new programmes, projects, structures, proceedings and budgets with SPS's Gender Policy.
- The workplace gender equality indicators are:
  - gender pay equity
  - gender composition at all levels of the workforce
  - gender composition of governing bodies
  - workplace culture and well-being
  - workplace sexual harassment
  - recruitment and promotion
  - gendered work segregation
  - retention and turnover

## **7. Diversity & Inclusion**

SPS is committed to creating a safe, respectful, and equitable environment for all genders, fostering an inclusive workplace where all individuals, regardless of gender identity or expression, are valued, and empowered to thrive.

SPS strongly believes in the inclusion and validation of queer and non-heteronormative identities in the organisation. It is cognisant of different working styles, visible and invisible disabilities of its employees.

We offer a collaborative working space for people coming from diverse cultural, regional, educational and linguistic backgrounds to work together, share and exchange ideas, experiences and expertise.