



9 June 2014 – In the wake of new cases of violence against women and girls in India, thousands of women have risen up to fight for their rights. In the rural villages of the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, women are organizing to fight for their rights and raise their standard of living.

Thanks to an empowerment project initiated by the state government with support from the UN's International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), women are organizing themselves into Shaurya Dal or "Courage Brigades" and together fighting domestic abuse, caste violence, corruption and malnutrition.

The [Tejaswini Rural Women's Empowerment Programme](#) focuses on women's development, building on IFAD's 25 years of experience working in close partnership with the Government of India. The outcome of this experience indicates that women's self-help groups are an effective means of improving the living conditions of poor households.

Women in 2733 rural villages in six districts of Madhya Pradesh have formed committees with local leaders to challenge social attitudes towards women, and to seek community-based solutions.

"There are so many issues here – gender violence, alcoholism, gambling, child marriage. Often the best solution lies not with law enforcement but by using community pressure to address

problems,” says Manoj Nayak, District Program Manager.

In Narayanpura village, Chhatarpur district, the project has helped a woman whose 14-year-old nephew was murdered by a neighbour, his fingers, toes and tongue severed, simply because the boy's goat pilfered some grain. Local police refused to help the low caste victim until the Courage Brigade women lay down across the main highway, blocking traffic and forcing action.

The Brigade has also regained control of a crucial government subsidised school mid-day meal scheme after a three-year battle during which poor, often malnourished children were served contaminated rice.

“We fought for three years... the teacher threatened us constantly, once he even threw a hot stove at us. But we didn't give in,” says Usha Bano, Courage Brigade member. They've also forced liquor and gambling dens to vacate the village, have built toilets so women needn't endanger themselves by walking up to two kilometres to relieve themselves, have stopped child marriages and have started a door-to-door campaign to clean stagnant village drains that endanger the health of their children.

Women, who are often victims of child marriage, illiteracy and domestic abuse are slowly transforming their own lives and those of their daughters. By pooling their money and loaning it to one another, they are also opening bakeries and beauty parlours, creating jobs for other women.

Recent attacks against women in India have served to underline the necessity for social change and courageous action, actions such as those taken by the Brigade. "We must put an end to these unacceptable, intolerable acts," [said UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon](#) , "violence against women is a peace and security issue. It is a human rights issue. It is a development issue."