



GVS women participating
in Beej Bomb Activity

THINKING ALOUD ALLOWED

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Working under the monsoon rainclouds hovering above Uttarakhand, we have steamy weather, rain most days, and get soaked when walking or riding a motorbike in communities. It has been a busy time recently as we continue our work in promoting mental health in rural and urban areas and also supporting new initiatives by the State mental health authority. We are excited to be rolling out the Parwarish, positive parenting program with six different partner organizations working in the districts of Uttarkashi, Tehri Garwal, and Dehradun. Working with support from the University of Melbourne, we have been running training workshops and inviting parents with teens to join one of the 30 different groups that we are running in the coming months.

We have also started a new project (funded by Ember) to provide psychosocial support to people in the State Jail in Suddowala. We have been building our own skills and knowledge to work in this new challenging area.

Our recent team discussions have pondered what ongoing sustainability for mental health we can build in communities. Many factors that are requisite for mental health communities require building trust, social inclusion, gender equity, and flattening hierarchies—these transformations of power hierarchies can take many years and feel daunting in the economic and social settings of today. Creativity, hope, and persistence are three team values we are focusing on through the rainy season. Please share and follow our Twitter handle: @BuransMentalH and we are thankful for your interest and support, and stay dry if you can!

Kaaren - on behalf of Burans team

Building community action for rights and health - Gram Vikas Samuh

Across the steep hills of Naugaon and Purola in Uttarkashi, there are hundreds of women's groups called Gramin Vikas Samuh. These were established in years gone by, to help those who are poor and marginalized by providing them with employment and income-generating activities. Yet due to a lack of leadership and support, many groups were not active. Burans identified that these groups could provide an exciting way to progress social accountability for health care. This is an approach where community members can build knowledge and skills on how to avail of any government schemes and services and also hold services accountable for the delivery of care as they were intended.



GVS group women applying and availing the government schemes

Burans' community workers across the area have helped re-form groups and facilitated topics like understanding the role and purpose of the group, primary problems in the village, and advocating for changes in health care. Women in groups were also educated about the Right Information Act and how to file an RTI act request. Practice sessions for RTI filling were also done which boosted the confidence of group members. Additional topics covered were the importance of the Chief Ministers helpline, saving money, and budgeting as well as building knowledge and skills in mental health.

After the completion of all the modules, the GVS women were more aware and engaged. Some groups advocated together for changes such as the need for clean water and drainage problems in the village. Women with increased knowledge were also able to file RTI and avail multiple government schemes. Some examples of outputs and outcomes achieved by GVS groups in the area include 46 right-to-education forms being filled to prompt action on access to education, four RTIs being filled, four ration cards have been obtained (for food security), three people now have pension cards, three MNREGA cards were issued, and 4 Ayushman Bharat cards (health insurance for low-income families provided by the government) were obtained.



Creating a safe space for young women in the Racecourse urban community

In December 2023 during the Burans- mental health symposium in Dehradun we were issued a daunting challenge by Dr. Amandeep Kaur, Additional Secretary govt. of Uttarakhand. She shared the need for young women living in Race-course Basti (an informal urban settlement in the city of Dehradun) to build skills in mental health, self-care, and reduced risk of violence and trafficking. A particularly vulnerable group in urban India is adolescent girls who have dropped out of school. They face numerous challenges, including social stigma due to limited education, they have limited opportunities for employment and many have poor self-regard and high levels of mental distress.

Picking up Dr. Kaur's challenge, we visited and spent time in this high-need area and met with the key leaders, AWW/ASHA (government health and child development workers), and traditional healers. These community leaders were very supportive and showed interest in the Nae Disha youth resilience and mental health group program which we planned to implement.

Burans' community workers started making connections in the community and invited 20 young women to join the Nae Disha program. The program involves 18 sessions held weekly over a four to five-month period. We formed a group of nine young women. Initially, it was very challenging to find a place to hold the group meetings as most residences are small single rooms.

Burans group facilitators showed high levels of initiative, and while we started meeting on the terrace of one house for conducting the sessions, it was not big enough for the interactive activities. The grandmother of Roshini, one group member, welcomed us to use her small veranda and this is now where our group meets each week.

With time, changes could be observed in the girls who showed increased confidence and more active participation in games, role plays, and other activities. A group facilitator shared about Sukanya shared: "Before joining the Nae Disha Group, she had no friends because of her intellectual disability and was made fun of. But after attending multiple sessions there is a mutual understanding between her and other girls in a group and this has helped her make some friends with peers."

Nae Disha has fostered peer support networks among adolescent girls. Earlier our community coordinators had to visit houses and call the girls for the session but now through the buddy system, most of the girls come with their friends and take responsibility to call others. One of the girls in the group, Aasmin has taken leadership to call all the girls for the sessions. By connecting young women with peers in their own neighborhoods who are facing similar challenges, this program creates a sense of belonging and reduces feelings of isolation.

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The Nae Disha group also provides a safe space for girls to share their stories, offer advice, and provide emotional support. This interaction enhances their self-esteem, encourages mutual learning, and promotes a sense of solidarity.

Nae Disha has been crucial in addressing the mental health needs of adolescent girls and their family members too. Through this, we have got some referrals and a strong relationship has been built in the community.

NB all names used in this article have been changed to protect the identities of group participants.

Nae Disha Group at Race Course with girls actively participating in fun activity.



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Contact us at info@burans.org