

JOINING VOICES

Delivering family planning in India



The women of Kanai Mahila Mandal

At first glance, the village of Paye in the Bhiwandi district of western Maharashtra looks like any ordinary Indian village. On a calm summer afternoon four women gather in an old shed that they have been using for over 20 years. They are members of the local women's group, *Kanai Mahila Mandal*, Kanai being the village deity.

The *mandal* has visibly changed village life in the last three decades. Thirty-two years ago it was derided but today it has 150 members who command a great deal of respect in Paye and the surrounding villages.

The Family Planning Association of India (FPA India) realised the need to bring local women together to spread awareness of the benefits of family planning and what began as a simple family planning initiative has become an inspiration for all the women in the village.

'The FPA India staff used to hold meetings and teach us something new every month. They emboldened us and empowered us,' says Ratnabai.

As a new recruit to the *mandal* in 1984, one of the first things she learnt was how to deal with domestic violence. 'We had to face a lot of difficulties along the way. It wasn't easy,' she says. 'Back in 1983–1984, this village was very underdeveloped. We weren't allowed to leave our homes. The home, the hearth and the child was all that our life revolved around.'

Ratnabai was married at the tender age of 16. In her new home the daughter-in-law's status was very low and she was expected to do housework without any say in her life or household matters.

Around this time, FPA India started its women's empowerment project that enabled women to participate in family planning matters.

They gathered women at *haldi-kumkum* ceremonies which are social gatherings where married women exchange haldi (turmeric) and kumkum (vermilion powder), as a symbol of their married status. As *haldi-kumkums* were the only times when women could leave their house without their husbands' consent they presented the perfect chance for women to be mobilised.

Ratnabai's mother-in-law and other women from the village started attending these meetings and agreed to start the *Kanai Mahila Mandal*, the local women's group.

Decision about contraceptive choice

Gradually, FPA India staff began advocating for family planning at *mandal* meetings. 'They educated us about contraceptive methods like IUDs and even handed out birth control pills and condoms. Earlier, a husband and wife would keep trying until they bore a son. Even if they had a lot of daughters, they would still try for a son,' explains Ratnabai.

After giving birth herself to a son, Ratnabai had a frank discussion with her husband about the family planning information she had received at the *Mahila Mandal*. It helped them with the spacing of the births of their second and third son.

Self-help groups have played a vital role in securing financial independence for Paye's women with 20 such groups today involved in individual or collective businesses.

The *mandal* and self-help groups have ensured that local women have access to funds in times of need while also enabling them to give out loans to their husbands. In stark contrast to 1983, Paye's women now have a say in their household finances.

The women from *Kanai Mahila Mandal* share a strong sense of community. 'Smaller families have a lot of benefits,' says Ratnabai. 'You can afford to educate everyone in the family. They tend to be more tightly knit and the woman of the house gets more free time for herself. Having too many children just puts financial and emotional strain on the family. If a family has only two children, you can nurture them and raise them well.'

Ratnabai gives a lot of credit to her husband, Kashinath Devlikar. He supported her in all her social endeavours and says he learned invaluable lessons in return. 'She is my wife by relation, but my mother at heart,' he confides in a soft tone. 'There is no home without a daughter, no knowledge without a woman. The *mandal* has truly taught this village what unity means.'



Cover: Ratnabai at Kitty Party and Haldi Kumkum

Above: Ratnabai with her husband, sons, daughter-in-law and grandchildren at her house.

Right: Ratnabai with other members of her mahila mandal group outside the community shed which she fought for

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Family Planning Association of India (FPA India)



Established in 1949, the Family Planning Association of India is a founding member of IPPF. Its work in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) covers safe motherhood and child survival, women's empowerment, male involvement, adolescent health and youth development.

FPA India operates 39 permanent clinics, 101 mobile facilities, and has a network of nearly 2,700 community-based distributors/services across India. As an advocate, the organization wants the Government of India to actively support Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). The organization has successfully advocated for the inclusion of family planning in the national agenda, with India now the first country to include family planning as part of its national development.



Above: FPAI community person during a condom distribution & awareness to sex workers in Bhiwandi

Left: Ratnabai with her husband

Below: FPAI OPD at their office in Bhiwandi

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Country context

India



Right: FPAI office in Bhiwandi

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In numbers



3,538,224
Number of contraceptive services provided in 2014 by FPA India

1,534,980
Number of contraceptive services provided to young people below the age of 25 by FPA India (2014)

36,116,000
Number of unintended pregnancies averted due to modern contraceptive use (2013)

During 2007–08, only about 54% of married women aged 15–49 or their husbands were using a contraceptive method and the contraceptive prevalence rate appears to have stagnated after 2004. Contraception in India tends to be focused on preventing births rather than spacing out pregnancies.

In 2012, at the London Family Planning Summit, the Indian Government made pledges to enable 120 million more women and girls across the world to use contraceptives by 2020. The government promised to scale up Universal Health Coverage through the National Rural Health Mission, its largest public health programme, and to introduce a wider choice of family planning methods in the new strategy. The government promised to distribute contraceptives through community health workers and rural health sub-centres. The family planning budget is expected to exceed US \$2 billion by 2020.