The Swayamsiddha project was coordinated by the BAIF Development Research Foundation (www.baif.com) in partnership with the International Development Research Centre (www.idrc.ca) and with the financial support of the Canadian International Development Agency (www.acdi-cida.gc.ca) and IDRC. The partners in the project included thousands of rural women across India.

The following organizations were involved:

- BAIF Institute for Rural Development, Karnataka
- BAIF Institute for Rural Development, Uttar Pradesh
- Chaitanya, Maharashtra
- Halo Medical Foundation, Maharashtra
- Maharashtra Institute of Technology Transfer for Rural Areas, Maharashtra
- Dharampur Uthan Vahini, Gujarat
- Gujarat Rural Institute for Socio Economic Reconstruction, Gujarat
- Rajasthan Rural Institute of Development Management, Rajasthan
- Society for Promotion of Eco Friendly Sustainable Development, Madhya Pradesh
*This document was developed and written by Katherine Hay. The images were taken in the Thane district of Maharashtra at the MITTRA project sites by Jason Taylor. All of the photographs were taken with the informed consent of their subjects and copies of all of the images were returned to the communities.*
The BAIF Development Research Foundation, Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and nine Indian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been exploring women’s empowerment processes through a five-year, multi-institution, multi-state initiative, the Swayamsiddha project.

Swayamsiddha (swayam, or self, and siddha, one who has proven capability or is empowered) embodies the project’s focus on improving the lives of women and girls in rural India, and empowering them to address their own socioeconomic and development needs. Since its inception, the project has reached more than 6,000 women and girls in 91 villages in six Indian states.

The images in this booklet trace the project’s efforts to create and implement an empowerment-oriented model of development and research. Although Swayamsiddha was rooted in a particular place and time, its lessons and experiences are, we believe, useful models for others involved in participatory development research and programs.
The Context

Compared to men, women in India are disempowered. Official statistics and multisectoral research illustrate the magnitude of women’s inequity. For example:

- Unlike the situation in most countries, men outnumber women in India: the ratio is 1,000 men to 927 women. Many women die before reaching adulthood because of gender-based inequities that translate into an imbalance of between 20 and 25 million fewer women.

- India has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, accounting for 12% of the deaths of rural women of reproductive age.

- The marriage of girls below the age of 18 is prevalent, denying them opportunities for education and economic independence.

- Women have little control over their health and fertility and disproportionately suffer from malnourishment and anemia.

- Women are legally discriminated against in land and property rights.

- Women receive unequal pay for their work. Throughout India, women receive lower wages than men for the same agricultural work.

Focusing on women’s empowerment does not suggest that men are not struggling, poor, or marginalized. For example, in the Thane district of Maharashtra, where these images were taken, 98% of families live below the poverty line. However, even within systems that oppress both men and women, women face greater inequities.
A kaleidoscope of women’s experiences

If gender inequity was deeply rooted, it was expressed in different ways and at different levels across the project. For example, male literacy rates were higher than women’s everywhere in Swayamsiddha. But the magnitude of the discrepancy varied. In Karnataka, for instance, 50% of women were literate, while in villages in Rajasthan the percentage was as low as 3%.

Early marriages were common in all the Swayamsiddha sites, but the reported percentage of girls marrying before the age of 18 varied from 7.9% in Gujarat to 35% in Madhya Pradesh.

Participants’ experiences, needs, and realities also covered a broad spectrum. For some women, merely attending a women’s meeting or looking a visitor in the eye were significant achievements. Other women, however, were more ready to take on leadership roles in their communities.
Empowerment is a process

Empowerment cannot be granted – it must be claimed. No development agency, nongovernmental agency, or research team can empower women – they can only facilitate the processes or conditions for women to empower themselves.

*Swayamsiddha, working hand-in-hand with women*

Swayamsiddha worked directly with 4,941 women and 1,133 girls from more than 600 community-based groups. Swayamsiddha teams worked with women to:

- expand their views of what was possible for their lives;
- build their capacity to claim and make these changes; and
- improve the environment for change.

In practice, this was an ongoing and multifaceted process of increasing women’s knowledge and building their confidence, as well as enhancing their ability to use this knowledge (both individually and in groups). The Swayamsiddha approach enabled women to make decisions about important issues in their lives – whether economic, social, cultural, or political – and to then to carry out those decisions.
Women define empowerment

For Mainaben, a 29-year-old woman from Mandvi Gujarat, empowerment meant standing up in the local gramshahbha (government) meeting to demand a ration card. Cardholders have access to essential commodities and food at subsidized prices. Cards are to be granted according to need, from a list drawn up by local officials of those living below the poverty line in the community. In practice, however, the system is often corrupt and the cards are distributed as “favours.” Mainaben took a stand against corruption by insisting that she be granted a card. She became a role model for others in her community.

In Karvi, Uttar Pradesh, strictly enforced gender biases against women exist, including mandatory veiling and limited presence of women in public spaces. One women’s group involved in Swayamsiddha held a children’s fair to emphasize the importance of eliminating gender discrimination from schools. Holding such an event in Karvi was a tremendous step forward. As one of the women involved noted, before the event “we would be afraid to talk to men, or meet them in public.”

Women live in contexts, spaces, and relationships that can hinder their ability to act. Changing that environment or conditions is critical to their empowerment.

One woman from Vansda, Gujarat defined empowerment as a woman’s ability to “fulfill her various roles...and solve her own problems.” Other women from the same village argued that empowerment should go beyond “personal changes to being able to influence the world outside” and “address the issues of the community’s poor.”
Empowerment is not an end – it is a process.
Starting with Women’s Needs

One of the project’s starting points was helping women to address their own needs. A first step was enabling women to articulate these needs.

As the project was implemented, different needs were expressed. Many were shared by all, including access to health, education, and food security; freedom from violence; and means to earn a livelihood. These, of course, are merely categories – no one spoke of “food or water security.” They talked of eating the remaining seeds and not having more to plant. They talked of women dying during childbirth, of a daughter’s marriage, of crops that were baking in drying fields, and of men who had migrated in search of work. They asked how life could be improved.

Once needs were identified, Swayamsiddha teams worked with women to address these concerns. This included ways to improve their daily lives – improving access to clean water, for example, introducing drudgery-reducing technologies, promoting income-generating activities, and encouraging girls’ education. The common thread between these activities was that they empowered women and girls or created an enabling environment for empowerment.
The power of solidarity

One of Swayamsiddha’s core tenets was that collectives were key to building confidence and solidarity.

When Swayamsiddha began, the microcredit movement was well established in India. Many project teams worked with women’s savings and credit groups or self-help groups (SHGs) as a platform for collective action.

A wide range of literature exists on the role of SHGs and development, both positive and negative. Microcredit has enabled poor rural women to access financial services that were previously unavailable through the commercial banking sector or only available at high interest rates from local money lenders.

Much evidence exists to show that many of these women combined access to this capital with hard work to forge paths out of poverty. Arguably, some advocates may overstate the power of microcredit and ignore the structural issues that underpin rural women’s poverty (such as agrarian reform, male domination of export crops, and economic policies that restrict small enterprises).

Swayamsiddha explored whether SHGs could be part of a broader empowering process. Microcredit was just one of the resources provided. Others included health education and income-generation activities. The goal was to use SHGs to enable women to gain access to economic resources, as well as to bring women together to explore, question, and develop new visions of gender roles, women’s rights, and citizenship in their communities.

Through Swayamsiddha, women were able to save more than 3 million rupees (CA $86 000), an enormous sum considering that most of their families lived on less than one dollar a day. The women also were able to access credit of more than 14 million rupees (CA $400 000).
Monetary achievements are relatively easy to record. It is more difficult to capture how the vision of what was possible for women in these communities also expanded.

For example, a woman in a rigidly caste-segregated community was asked what had been the most far-reaching effect of joining the women’s microcredit group. “Now I can enter upper caste homes and sit and talk with those women on the same dhurries (rugs) and even eat with them because I am a member of the group. Earlier this could never have happened,” said Manto.
Empowerment cannot be granted it must be claimed.
Empowerment and Citizenship go hand in hand

Empowerment and citizenship are linked. Functioning and thriving health care, education, and governance systems require an engaged and proactive citizenship.

Instead of setting up alternative health systems, the project used SHGs as a platform to build women’s and girls’ understanding of their bodies, their health, and their rights to health care. Working through the SHGs, women created linkages with various service providers and lobbied for services that met their needs. The SHGs documented some 850 attempted linkages with banks, government departments, schools, and primary health centres, 76% of which were successful. Encouraged by the success of these collective actions, the groups and communities attempted further linkages.

The SHGs became forums for addressing health issues in the community. More than 500 such groups regularly offered health programs and events, such as demonstrations of the use of oral rehydration salts and means of purifying water, discussions of reproductive health issues, and training in the preparation of weaning foods. Groups tackled persistent and challenging issues, including such violence-related topics as dowry, child marriage, and spousal abuse.

More than 40% of the groups held violence-related discussions, clearly demonstrating that they had evolved from savings and lending forums, into venues in which broader community issues could be addressed.
**Women’s work – as a starting point**

Women are often underpaid or unpaid for their work. They are often overburdened by their daily tasks. Their contributions to society and the economy are often ignored.

Swayamsidda project teams worked with SHGs to promote women’s roles as workers in both productive activities (on-farm and off-farm) and reproductive activities (child care, subsistence, and household work).

This was done in many ways, including the introduction of drudgery-reducing technologies such as water pumps, livestock rearing, and promoting more equitable sharing of household work.

The principle underlying these interventions was that rural women are workers, that there is strength in being a worker, and that women’s status as workers and their work should be recognized by themselves, their families, and their communities.
Putting women and girls first

In the Swayamsiddha project’s initial stages, concerns were raised that women’s rights and empowerment could be subsumed within broader community development goals if they were not articulated clearly. A conscious decision was therefore made to make women’s and girls’ needs and rights a priority.

This decision had a number of implications. For example, during the first few years, women were the key leaders and decision-makers for most activities and made up at least 50% of project teams. This helped communities become comfortable with women’s new, public roles.

As the capacity of research teams grew and their understanding of social and gender issues increased, they began to work with the entire community and to involve men and other groups more directly in programming. By then, most areas had active, strong women’s groups. The social changes leading to empowerment were not complete but the process had begun.
Building capacity – learning by doing

Swayamsiddha was initiated and implemented by grassroots NGOs. Most of these organizations were used to working with men and were largely staffed by men. Putting women and girls first helped them become more comfortable in working with women and having mixed-gender staff teams.

The organizations’ visions and definitions of success varied. A first step for most organizations was to build the capacity of a core group of staff and apply these new skills in the field.

Swayamsiddha team members who were initially unconvinced of the validity of this approach became engaged when they saw the reactions and emerging leadership of women in the communities. And so, just as women and men in the communities changed, so did the researchers and project staff.
Empowerment through knowledge

The emphasis on empowerment through knowledge and collective learning has meant that Swayamsiddha has become an experiment in community development. Teams built robust and innovative monitoring and evaluation systems and developed applied research activities to capture changes in the communities, themselves, and their organizations.

The concepts and processes of monitoring, evaluation, and research evolved over time but the emphasis was on use and learning. The communities and local NGOs controlled the knowledge agenda and used it to inform and improve their work. Instead of emphasizing accountability to an external donor, the project emphasized accountability to the local communities.

A field-based system was set up to monitor various indicators of change over time. A number of in-depth research studies and evaluations were carried out to explore issues related to women’s empowerment. One set of studies focused on women’s malnutrition and explored various factors affecting women’s health, such as fasting practices, norms around child spacing, and linkages between access to water and health.

These studies required demystifying, monitoring, research and evaluation. They also required building the capacity of Swayamsiddha teams to engage in these processes. The development of rigorous and participatory data collection and analysis tools was essential to the project. Most importantly, it required developing strategies for bringing the project results to the attention of decision-makers.

By the project’s completion at the end of 2005, all the partners were engaged in needs-based and participatory planning, monitoring, evaluation, and research activities. They had also expanded their capacity in gender programing.
Empowerment is not neutral

Empowerment is not neutral and research and development programs on empowerment cannot be neutral. Swayamsiddha reinforced the importance of being transformative.

The groups and individuals involved in Swayamsiddha wanted change – change in the way they worked and in their understanding of women’s rights and empowerment. Most importantly, they wanted to change the lives of women and girls.

It has been a long journey of many small steps. There are many more to go, but much has been learned.

For more information about this project or the research IDRC supports, please visit [www.idrc.ca](http://www.idrc.ca)