

DETERMINING WOMEN'S DESTINY

How evaluating an educational program that helps women in India empower themselves could help ensure its future

POSTED BY NIKI WILSON ON MAY 17, 2016

Just outside the city of Muzaffarpur in the Indian state of Bihar, a middle-aged woman named Vibha works as a stonemason in a production plant. Without knowing the context, there would be nothing remarkable about this situation — after all, women are paid to work physical jobs around the world every day. But not here, where women don't often have the education and training required to earn money for themselves. Vibha is known locally as “the first woman mason.” The fact that she has a job — let alone one traditionally held by men — was a social breakthrough in her community.

Vibha's journey to employment was born from a necessity for the most basic needs. She comes from one of Bihar's poorest districts, a place where there are neither bathrooms nor infrastructure for sewage. Many people simply defecate in open fields or patches of vegetation, exposing themselves to E. coli and the bites of poisonous snakes and insects. It's a difficult situation for all that live there, but women suffer additional hardships.

As public nudity is taboo for women in India, they tend to only relieve themselves before dawn or after dark, a practice that can lead to medical problems caused by attempting to suppress urination and defecation for the entire day and leave them vulnerable to sexual assault.

The Mahila Samakhya program is working to help prevent such problems. Launched in 1988 by the Indian government, it educates and empowers rural women on issues such as sanitation, domestic violence, education and child marriage. A key part of the program is that women identify specific issues important to their communities and support each other to find solutions.

Through her local Mahila Samakhya program, in 2000 Vibha learned about the basic principles of hygiene and sanitation, and was encouraged to participate in the planning and management of water and sanitation resources. The program helped train her and other women as masons so that they could build toilet facilities themselves. The work not only made Vibha's environment more secure but also created a path to her economic empowerment.

The process by which Mahila Samakhya economically empowers women like Vibha is the subject of a three-year study being conducted by Nivedetha Menon and her colleagues at the Bangalore-based Centre for Budget and Policy Studies. Menon hopes the study will help her and her team understand more about how women learn to negotiate and advocate for themselves. “What is the process through which women start to see themselves as persons?” she wonders of those who come from districts where women are often considered property and are married away from their families at young ages.

Funders of the centre's evaluation — Canada's International Development Research Centre, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation — hope that it will provide op-



A member of the Mahila Samakhya program outside her home in Sangur Panchayat, Karnataka. Women who joined the program are helping India's Centre for Budget and Policy Studies evaluate its effectiveness. (Photo: Courtesy of the Institute for Financial Management and Research LEAD)

portunities to learn from the program's successes, along with opportunities to lend credibility to the outcomes.

“Evidence-based policy is becoming more and more important,” says Sharon Buteau, executive director of the Chennai-based Institute for Financial Management and Research LEAD, an organization supporting the centre with their experience in setting up successful study designs for collecting information in rural India. Buteau says the government must show more transparency in their programs. It's not enough that they exist — programs must be evaluated and reported on.

The evaluation team is working in Bihar and the state of Karnataka, collecting data from almost 4,000 households. While in some areas Mahila Samakhya groups have been established for decades, in others, the program is relatively new to the community. This will allow researchers to observe the effects of the program at different levels of progression.

Meanwhile, Vibha travels around Bihar teaching other women masonry skills, takes university courses and is held up by her children as a role model. Through the support of Mahila Samakhya and the women in her community, she has overcome many gender stereotypes to become a respected community member. In doing so, she has laid the groundwork, brick by brick, for others to follow.

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READING AS THINKING

Answer the following in complete sentences.

1. a) Provide a summary of the article.

- b) What is the important message that the writer is trying to share?

2. Vibha had to overcome gender stereotypes to achieve her goals. The last sentence in the article says that “in doing so, she has laid the groundwork, brick by brick, for others to follow.”

- a) How has Vibha laid the groundwork for other women to break through stereotypes? Provide evidence from the article.

- b) What if Vibha had not been successful in her work?

- c) Describe some of your recommendations for what the next steps should be in this project.

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3. Infer four personality traits that you feel Vibha has.

TRAIT	REASON FOR INFERENCE

4. Sharon Buteau, executive director of the Chennai-based Institute of Financial Management and Research LEAD, says that “evidence-based policy is becoming more and more important.” Using your knowledge of data collection and statistics, evaluate the importance of her statement.

5. The question “What is the process through which women start to see themselves as persons?” is asked in the article. Using information from the text and previous understanding and experiences, identify the criteria that you feel is significant in the process of women seeing themselves as persons.

INFORMATION FROM THE TEXT

PREVIOUS UNDERSTANDINGS/EXPERIENCES

CRITERIA

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6. a) What do you see in the picture? Record your observations below.

OBSERVATIONS:

b) Create 3 questions that you would ask the person who took the picture.

c) Infer why this picture was chosen to accompany the article.

7. Think about a time when you have had to learn to negotiate and advocate for yourself. What judgment would you make about the importance of these skills?

8. Describe how you would teach the importance of proper hygiene and sanitation to the people in Bihar.

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Think-Pair-Share

9. *Think*

The lasting negative impact of stereotyping groups of people with certain characteristics is prevalent. Through the support of Mahila Samakhya, gender stereotypes are being challenged in Bihar.

a) Look up the definition of stereotype in the dictionary. Record it below.

b) Rewrite the definition in your own words.

c) List three examples of stereotyping throughout history.

d) Stereotyping is often related to bullying. Identify one example of stereotyping in your school. Elaborate on why you think it is a problem and reflect on things that would dispute the stereotype.

Pair

Share and discuss the stereotype that you identified as being a problem in your school in a small group. As a group, choose one of the stereotypes. Create a short survey that will produce data on what students in your class feel would be the best proposed solutions for challenging the stereotype.

Share

As a class, share and discuss your findings.

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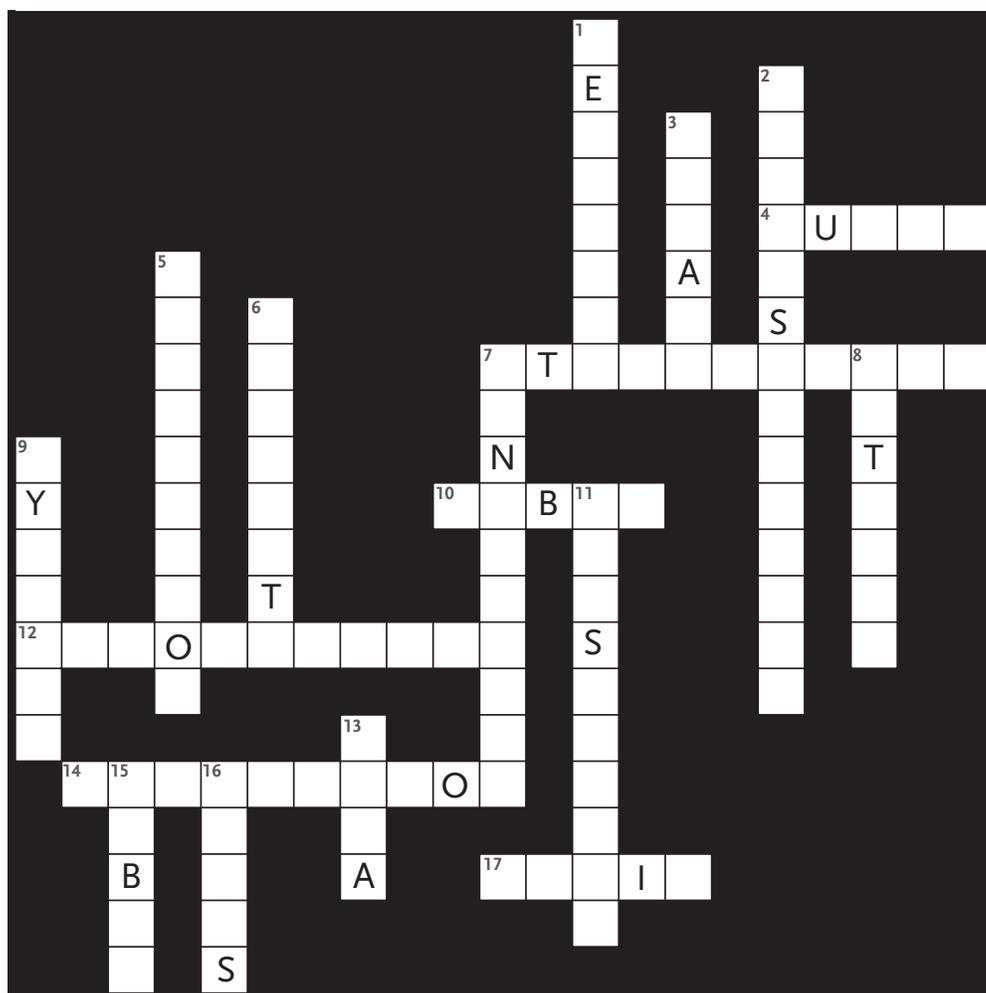
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ONLINE

1. Watch this [video](#) to learn more about the Mahila Samakhya program.
2. Watch this [video](#) from the IDRC to learn more.
3. Locate Muzaffarpur on [Google Maps](#).
Complete the following:
 - a) Provide directions to someone travelling from the capital city, New Delhi, to Muzaffarpur.
 - b) What country is north of Muzaffarpur?
 - c) Compare and contrast the images in the photo sphere to images in your own neighborhood.
 - d) Click on the Earth view and explore the 3D function.
4. Learn more about stonemasonry by looking through Google Images.
5. Learn more about [Nivedetha Menon](#) and the [Centre for Budget and Policy Studies](#).
6. Learn more about [Sharon Buteau](#).
7. View this [video](#) for some of the sights and sounds of India.
8. Find out more about the [International Development Research Centre](#).
9. Learn more about [The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#).

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CROSSWORD:

Across

4. People who live in the country instead of the city
7. To believe, unfairly, that all people with a particular characteristic are the same
10. The first woman mason
12. To give power
14. A person who cuts, prepares, and builds with stone
17. The country where the city of Muzaffarpur is located

Down

1. To pass solid waste from the body
2. Basic structures need for a region to function properly
3. Waste material that is carried away in pipes
5. Plants that cover an area
6. To argue for or support a cause
7. Keeping places free of dirt, infection and disease
8. Areas distinct from the things around it
9. Conditions that support good health
11. People living together in one house
13. Information used to calculate, analyze, or plan something
15. Forbidden
16. Things that are needed in order to live