

TCIHC-Coached ASHA Raises Awareness among MAS of Available Family Planning Services

by **Deepti Mathur** | Oct 4, 2018

Contributors: *Dr. Basab Gupta, George Philip, Hemant Kumar Das, Dr Sanjay Pandey*

In Indira Marg colony in ward 14 of Puri, the air is buzzing with excitement at the Anganwadi Center (AWC), where members of the Maa Bata Mangala Mahila Arogya Samiti (MAS) (also referred to as a Women's Group) have gathered. The AWC, which provides basic health care in the Indian public health care system, is located in Odisha and serves over 120 households with over 500 residents, mostly laborers and small vendors.



A MAS member makes an entry in the eligible couples register.

The 16 female members of the Maa Bata Mangala MAS meet monthly. At a recent meeting, they were asked to share their day-to-day experience and challenges with National Urban Health Mission (NUHM) representatives, who were there on an official visit.

Hemlata, a shy woman, began by saying she considered all group members to be socially conscious, which is why they are motivated to address and improve the general health issues and needs of their community. She added that family planning was never a priority because family planning services were available, albeit at a distant district women's hospital. Only a few family planning services were available at the nearby urban primary health center (UPHC).

But she recalled that Shantilata Pradhan – an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) – told them a couple of months back that family planning services were now available at the nearby UPHC. Pradhan had received coaching support from The Challenge Initiative for Healthy Cities (TCIHC) and was able to provide the MAS members with a family planning technical orientation that, in turn, enabled them to become family planning champions.

“We discussed amongst ourselves about the issues we have faced – unwanted pregnancies, unwanted abortions, of the fear of becoming pregnant again,” Hemlata said. “We felt if we had family planning solutions and choices, then we would have lived stress-free lives.”

After discussions with the ASHA, the MAS group decided to create awareness about using family planning methods in their community.

“We saw this as a logical extension of our work for the betterment of our community women,” said Hemlata. The group started by creating a list of all eligible couples in their community for the ASHA, who then provided those couples with quality family planning counselling on healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies, as well as short-acting contraceptive methods and/or referrals based on their voluntary and informed choice. “We were told by the ASHA about the initiation of fixed-day services (FDS), which provides assured and quality family planning services on fixed days at the UPHCs,” Hemlata said.

The ASHA told them when the FDS was scheduled and asked them to mobilize women, so they reached out not only to the women on their list who needed family planning services, but also women in their own MAS group since Hemlata said they weren’t using any method. When they visited the UPHC on the appointed FDS day, they were counselled on all family planning methods.

Hemlata said she chose the intrauterine contraceptive device along with 10 other members of her MAS group. This experience has bolstered their confidence in talking about family planning to other women in the community.

“It’s been a month and we are living a stress-free life – at least on the family planning aspect,” Hemlata said. “All the neighboring women of the area consult us, [and we] in turn refer them to UPHC and the ASHA.”

Dr. Basab Gupta, Deputy Commissioner of NUHM, was part of the official NUHM visit where the MAS group told stories of their experience. “I was enthralled to hear this amazing true story of these women champions. If these women groups were to work as a true connection between the community aspirations and health service delivery, then the day will not be far when every citizen of the country will get quality health care services provided for them by the government,” Gupta said.