

## Jal Sakhi- A case story from Uttarakhand

“When I was younger, my parents weren’t allowing me to go to school after 8<sup>th</sup> standard. I fought and rebelled while they tried their best to keep me from school. But then, my grandmother supported me and fought with me for my right to be educated. Since then, I worked hard, and studied, and went on to do three masters degrees”, says Janaki, a *Jal Sakhi* under Partners in Prosperity’s rural economy projects in Uttarakhand.

Just like Janaki, there are 6 other *Jal Sakhis* who work across different villages under the project. As the name indicates, these women work in these villages and spread knowledge about the efficient use of water. None of these *Jal Sakhis* are like each other. They each come from different homes and hardships. Their economic and social statuses are sometimes starkly different from the other. However, what these women have in common is their willingness to work for the welfare of society and a desire to be contributing members of society.

The concept of *Jal Sakhis* has been a successful approach in the projects. Since women are equally involved in agriculture, reaching out to them via these *Jal Sakhis* has proved to be a welcome intervention. These women farmers were selected based on their interest and commitment towards the project aims and their eagerness to learn. These women have since then been trained on various components of Water Efficient Techniques (WET), organic farming and community capacity building. They further disseminate this knowledge to the rice farmers in the village. Each woman was initially made in charge of 4-5 villages. However, at present, there are some *Jal Sakhis* who work in up to 20 villages. They helped form Water and Environment Groups (WEG) and conduct meetings for these groups regularly. During these meetings, they build capacities, set demonstration plots, monitor crop growth as well as pest and nutrient control measures. It must be noted, that although



the *Jal Sakhis* were have been assigned one project, they serve as crucial mobilisers even for other related projects.

The *Jal Sakhis* have received several trainings on System of Rice Intensification (SRI), Alternate Wetting and Drying (AWD), direct seeding, water quality testing, weed control training, vermicomposting, composting, soil quality testing, intercropping, line sowing, harvesting techniques, water conservation, *jal bharao*, preparation of demo plots, measuring rainfall, etc. They have also been taken on various exposure visits, to build their capacities.



Unlike a lot of other employment opportunities for women in rural areas, the job of these *Jal Sakhis* requires them to break through gender stereotypes and limitations on a daily basis. Whether married or single, each of these women have an equal responsibility of their families at home, which they must carry out dutifully along with their job. Their job does not restrict their interaction to women (like is the case with SHGs), but with people from all genders, castes, classes and ages. Sometimes they must travel long distances by foot, in harsh terrains and harsh climates. Nevertheless, they do it religiously, and out of a sense of commitment to their jobs.

Over the years, the *Jal Sakhis* and their work has been accepted and acknowledged amongst the rural communities. They are now looked at by their peers as women with agency, working for the community and for their resources. When Renu (*Jal Sakhi*) was asked if she finds her job difficult, she said, "Initially I found it difficult, because people would not take me seriously. But now, I have learnt the tactics on how to talk to people and convince them. It's much easier now, people know me." The *Jal Sakhis* are a prime example of the crucial role that women can play in a rural economy, when given the necessary agency, and the means to access it.