



"Learning is important,
not just education",
proudly claims Balu of
Neswad village

Bhavnagar district, Gujarat,
India

A feisty, *Koli* woman decided to question restrictions on her mobility. Knowing her husband's love for *Bhawai*, she told him, "If you stop going out for *Bhawai* during Navratri, then even I won't step out. Let's make same rules for both of us".

In 1996, Balu Dabhi assumed leadership in the women's collective in her village, Neswad. Amalgamating such collectives, Samarthan Mahila Sangathan, a district collective working for women's dignity and justice was formed in Bhavnagar district. In 2005, Balu became the first member of the Justice Committee constituted to support women survivors of violence. She gained conversance in basic laws, developed strategies to deal with families of survivors, police, village and caste panchayats and the Court.

"Change comes by leading with example. Over time, when I returned from meetings, my husband would keep a warm meal ready. I ensured space and agency for my daughter in law too. When Mongi, the first female pump operator in the area, lost her husband, I mobilized other women and convinced her family not to subjugate her to age-old mourning rituals of not seeing anyone for 2 months, eating meagre meals and staying behind a long veil."

From 2013-15, Balu served as President. At 61, she is today an Advisor to the Sangathan. Balu's wisdom led her to ensure space to younger, emerging leaders to take the baton ahead. A current Executive Committee member says, "A woman without education has shared with us, her pearls of wisdom. She has truly educated us".

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