Birolipar is a small village in Pandhurna block of Madhya Pradesh, situated about 55 km from the district headquarters Chhindwara. With about 70 households and a population of about 300, the main occupation of people is agriculture. The main crops are paddy, maize and chickpea.

WOTR is implementing a project titled ‘Watershed Development, Sustainable Agriculture and Livelihood Development’ in eight villages of Pandurna Block, Chhindwara District of Madhya Pradesh. The project began in 2016 and has as its main activities—farm bunding, digging of wells, women empowerment through Self-Help Groups and organic farming (maize in kharif; chickpea and wheat in rabi).

Women empowerment was a part of the project, through which SHGs were formed. As is often the case in rural government schools in India, teacher absenteeism was a problem in Birolipar as well. Since December 2016, one of the only two teachers at the local primary school in the village was habitually absent.

In this village, the absentee teacher, according to local women, was a major problem as it affected the future of their children. He was a teacher of standard 1 and 2, which are crucial years for children. Seema Merskole, the secretary of ‘Mahalaxmi SHG’ and chairperson of School Committee tells us the story.

"Since agriculture is the main occupation in our village, many people migrate for work after the rabi season every year. In such conditions, good education for children in our village is essential for them to have the freedom to choose a career of their choice. Birolipar has a government primary school; it has classes from 1 to 5. The middle school is 3 km away from the village. There are around 45 students studying in the village school. The teacher has been deputed in the school since more than four years. The biggest problem with our school was that one particular teacher was habitually absent since his appointment four years ago.

"He used to come to school very irregularly and mark himself present even for the days he was not there in the school. Sometimes, he even used to take away the muster with him and didn’t turn up next day to school. On such occasions, the other teachers had to take attendance of their classes on paper. First and second standard students were not learning anything. He would simply come once in 15 days and mark himself present and leave. This was not just an issue about one student, but of all the young children in the village. Many of the students have stopped their education after 5th standard because they were not able to cope up with the studies. We women in the village decided to put an end to his thoughtless behaviour which was costing students irreversibly. The women finally ran out of patience."

Merskole says, “After discussion among other women, I formed a surveillance team of 10-11 women each. I told the other teachers that now we were looking forward to solve this issue that was pending since December 2016. For three days, different teams used to go to school to check whether he was present at the school. The teacher didn’t turn up on all three days. On the third day, we called the Education Department and requested them to come here to review the situation. Then we called on the Chief Minister’s Helpline and informed them as well about the situation. The whole team from Education Department arrived quickly to look into the matter. We presented the facts about his teaching and how pupils were suffering because of this inept teacher.”
“The team didn’t hesitate to rebuke him with a stern warning and deduct three days salary. The teacher was even categorically asked if he was really capable of performing the duties of a teacher.

He was too ashamed to say anything and remained silent. He just said he would continue to work as a teacher,” says Merskole. This incident has changed the attitude of the teacher. He now comes regularly and conducts classes on time. What is more significant is the change in attitude of women of the village.

Merskole says “We refuse to remain mute when something wrong is happening. Even in Village Development Committee (VDC) meeting or other meetings when faced with resistance from men, we don’t give in and try to give our honest opinion and observations,” she says.

This successful intervention has made the women of Birolipar look towards a bright future. With a view to promote economic empowerment, Merskole says that in the future, the SHGs want to procure oranges and sell them. “The next step is for women to empower themselves economically. This incident has made us realize that with unity and determination, we women can achieve anything we want,” she signs off.

Seema Merskole, secretary of Mahalaxmi SHG and chairperson of the school committee is at the centre.