

Where There's Will, There's a Way

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Challenge

The Nizamabad district in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh (AP) and current Telangana is predominantly agriculture based economy as Godavari River enters into Telangana at Kandhakurthi in Nizamabad district. The women folk in the rural areas generally earned their living by working as an agricultural labour or by rolling *beedi* (unfiltered cigarette made with rolling tobacco inside dried leaves). With the inflation touching every aspect of life, these earnings adding close to five hundred rupees a month were not even sufficient for their sustenance in the 1990s in Yedpally village. Hence, the occupation of rolling *beedi* and helping out on farms were rendered unsustainable in today's day and age. The lack of any other skill set marred the hopes of these villagers.

Response

The beginnings were humble but as they say - a single step for man but a giant leap for mankind – only in this case, it was the women and the womankind. The ten poor women from Yedpally village courageously supported by District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) formed themselves into a self-help group (SHG) named Rudrama Devi Mahila Sangam with a seed capital of thirty rupees per member per month. DRDA has traditionally been the principal organ at the district level to oversee the implementation of anti-poverty programmes of the Ministry of Rural Development.

Action Taken

Under the aegis of DRDA, the transformation began once the group was sanctioned a leaf-plate making unit with a unit cost of Rupees eighty thousand with a fifty percent subsidy from DRDA. However, the most challenging task was to acquire the skills needed for manufacturing leaf-plates as none of them had ever made a plate in the past. The DRDA released a revolving fund of Rupees fifteen thousand to the group and imparted training to the members in leaf-plate making to get them started on the job. Srimati Ramanamma became an expert in leaf plate making and in turn, trained other local women enabling them to become part of the new trade.

The DRDA took all the members to Hyderabad to acquaint them with the raw materials market, packaging techniques and the marketing skills. The exposure in addition to the training programs honed their skills at par with other people involved in the leaf-plate industry. Srimati Ramanamma emerged as the group leader who would frequently visit the nearby towns like Bondhan, Nizamabad and other big mandal headquarters in an attempt to procure orders for their fledgling leaf-plate business. The exposure to the market and the customers facilitated the expansion of product line. The product offerings diversified to different types of leaf plates like tiffin plates, silver/gold wrapped leaf plate in addition to the ordinary leaf plate.

The coy rural women who had never stepped outside the four walls of their houses and the farmlands were conversing with the city officials and buyers like professional business women. They began participating in the exhibitions and fairs held at mandal headquarters and nearby districts. They showcased their talent at the State level DW CRA (Development of Child and Women in Rural Areas) exhibition and managed to sell most of their products. The officials sanctioned a shop in the DW CRA market to the group as an outlet for selling their plates.

These illiterate women taught themselves to read and write. They needed to understand the basic concepts of numbers, subtraction, addition and multiplication to sell their products and buy the raw materials. Their labors bore fruits not only in terms of increased income but the appreciation and applause that came their way. During the

industrial exhibition organized in Nizamabad, the group's activities were lauded by none other than the Honorable Governor of Andhra Pradesh (at that time), Dr. C RangaRajan. The governor admired the grit and the will of these women in shaping their own future by overcoming all the obstacles. The DRDA under the ambit of DWCRA undoubtedly played a stellar role in improving the lives of these women.

The other group members namely Laxmi and V. Bhagyamma managed the accounts and finances while Ramanamma led other activities of the group¹¹. With economic prosperity, the monthly income of these women quadrupled from five hundred rupees to over two thousand rupees per month. The positive impact of financial independence was visible in multiple ways. The children who had never set foot in a school were learning in the classrooms along with other kids. With increased awareness and the support of the government and the local administration, the eligible women in the group underwent family planning operations.

The women started participating in the social welfare programmes and initiatives like Janma bhoomi and Clean and Green Akshara Sankranthi program organized in their areas. They developed a sense of ownership and partnership with the administration. They felt encouraged by the officials and participated actively in all the public welfare programmes.

The journey that began with a motley group of ten optimistic women changed the landscape and the destiny of scores of women in the district.

Learning

1. In bringing social reform, it is imperative for the government to engage with people at the lowest strata by sharing information about schemes/programmes and encouraging participation.
2. Active involvement of people along with the support of officials boosts the success of programmes.
3. To empower economically backward sections of society, training in addition to the financial assistance goes a long way in promoting the capability and wellbeing of poor citizens.

Questions

1. What is the role played by the government in the social welfare of the rural population?
2. In today's dynamic world, how do you equip people to deal with change?
3. Why is it important to focus on the skill set of the people?

Course Positioning

The caselet is suitable for a course in Organizational Behavior and Group Behavior. As the caselet throws light on the transformational journey of women in a village, it will be helpful in introducing topics like empowerment, group behavior, and managing change.