

SHE INSPIRES

Stories from the Tea
Sector in Assam



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Welcome to our special edition of the UN Women Ezine, where we proudly present a collection of inspirational stories that highlight the transformative power of training and empowerment for women in Assam. Tea Garden workers constitute approximately 20% of Assam's population, a region responsible for over half of India's tea production. Estimates suggest that there are around 6.5 million workers, with a sizable number residing in housing provided by over 800 tea estates in Assam.

This community earns a meager wage of approximately Rs 232 (around \$3) per day. Women endure significant hardships, including digital financial illiteracy, intimate partner violence, domestic violence, and working during pregnancy, leading to challenges in providing proper nutrition through exclusive breastfeeding for their babies. Despite active POSH policies and committees, they are vulnerable to sexual harassment from higher authorities and lack support from extended families. Despite active POSH policies and committees, they are vulnerable to sexual harassment from higher authorities and lack support from extended families. These women also grapple with issues related to early/multiple marriages, nutrition, mental health, violence against women, limited birth control and spacing options, extreme poverty, and restricted access to subsidized food supplies through the Public Distribution System (PDS).

In this edition, we delve into the lives of resilient women who, having undergone training on various laws and policies including domestic violence awareness and women's empowerment, have emerged as formidable gender warriors in their communities. These remarkable stories not only shed light on the challenges they have overcome but also exemplify the potential of education and empowerment to ignite positive change, creating a ripple effect that empowers countless others. Join us as we celebrate the indomitable spirit and determination of these women, whose journeys serve as a beacon of hope for a more equitable and just society.





INTRODUCTION


UN Women launched its COVID-19 response programme in 2021 across ten tea gardens in Assam, with an aim to empower women and girls in the tea supply chain. The programme was focused on creating awareness among women workers in Assam's tea gardens – a region known for its deep poverty and skewed development parameters – regarding health, wellness, and safety.

We wanted to create an environment where women were able to live equal lives and work to the best of their potential, especially in the context of a grave humanitarian crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic. Preliminary assessments had shown a need for improving awareness on nutrition, mental health, family planning, COVID prevention and care, and strengthening existing legal and healthcare structures to accelerate the fight against gender violence and close the gender gap in health and survival.

UN Women, in partnership with implementing partners Bindi International, also reached out to young men and women and trained them to become Community Champions to improve awareness about women's rights and advocate for their holistic empowerment within their communities.



MANJU KARMAKAR



It has been years since her son went missing from the Indian capital, but Manju is confident she will know him the moment she sets her eyes on him. “He has a mark on his forehead from when he was attacked by a bull,” she says. “He might be older now, but the mark would still be there.”





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In 2013, Her son Shobir, then 17 years old, had called her at 2 am from Delhi where he was working. “I did not know what he was doing there, where he was working,” she remembers. “He told me he is leaving Delhi as his employers were mistreating him. I told him to come back home.” But he never did – his family thinks that he boarded the wrong train and got lost.

After they did not hear from Shobir for a long while, Manju’s elder son went to Delhi to look for him. But since they had no information about where Shobir worked, the search was futile. “I could have done so much more,” Manju says sadly. “But I had no knowledge of what to do in a situation like that. I did not even know where Delhi was.”

So, Manju and her family kept waiting at home for Shobir to return. “We also didn’t know that we could go to the police, and they could help us look for him.” Manju was so scared and shocked that for weeks she could not talk to anyone. “I just went to temples to pray for his safe return.” However, after participating in the UN Women

training in her tea garden in 2021, she knows now how much time she had wasted. “If I had access to this training before – I would have known the path to take to look for my son. I would have known to walk into a police station with his picture and filed a missing person’s complaint.”

The training and awareness sessions, led by UN Women’s implementing partners have made her aware of her legal rights; it has opened a world of legal systems and opportunities. And she is paying it forward by helping her community understand and navigate similar legal challenges.

The training made me realize how much time I wasted doing nothing concrete to find my son,” she says. “It has helped me understand the power of right knowledge and information. In my heart I always knew there was a way to find my son – now I know the way, and, in the process, I am getting to help others in my community, too, by educating them about various legal provisions and their legal rights.”



ANASTASIA TOPPO



Anastasia had been assisting the medical officer in charge of the Kellyden Tea Garden, with maternal and child health when she got an opportunity to participate in a training to become an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA), community health workers employed by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare under India's National Rural Health Mission.





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“Of the three women who had been selected for the programme, two decided to join the Anganwadi programme, while the other one was pregnant and could not make it to the training,” Anastasia says.

“The medical officer suggested I go instead for the training since I was already doing something similar and was really good at it.” Anastasia loved her work at the tea garden level and was overjoyed to continue to do the work as an ASHA. “Creating awareness about safe motherhood and childhood is very fulfilling,” she says. “I feel blessed to be able to do so.”

And part of the reason is that she remembers a time not so long ago in the tea gardens when institutional deliveries were still unheard of and women delivered at home, often succumbing to

preventable pregnancy-related complications. “Women died at childbirth just because their blood pressure was not monitored during their pregnancies,” she remembers. “Every year there would be at least 4-5 women who died at childbirth.”

According to Niti Aayog, for every 100,000 live births in India, 130 women die due to pregnancy-related complications. Assam’s maternal mortality rate (MMR) of 237 is double India’s average but it has also seen considerable progress from over a decade ago when it used to be 480.

While Anastasia’s passion for the well-being of mothers and children in her community drove her work – participating in UN Women trainings has deepened her passion for the holistic well-being of her community. “I am now aware of





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all the laws and policies and interventions that are at my disposal to help the women of my community in terms of their health and safety," she says. "The days of the trainings were a series of conversations about women and their needs. It left me with a sense of security to know that there are laws to protect women."

Anastasia was also a first responder during the COVID-19 pandemic. "I was scared," she remembers. "But then the work I do is for my community – and I put aside my personal fears for the safety of my community because I was equipped to help them." Covid-19 was a stressful time for all – especially first responders like Anastasia.

However, she turned it into an opportunity to grow into a fiercer advocate of equal healthcare accessibility, gender equality and social justice. She raised her voice on issues surrounding

women's safety and local instances of gender discrimination and violence. She was a passionate participant at the training sessions, encouraging other women to participate in events and help build conversations under the project.

Equipped with information on COVID-safe healthcare protocols, managing health emergencies, nutrition and contraception outreach, Anastasia works tirelessly for the welfare of her community.

And her reward? "When I stop by their homes – the sight of a healthy child, a smiling mother fills my heart with gratitude."



HEMA REDDY



Hema is the member of a Mothers' club, a local group consisting of women workers, ASHA/ANM and AWW created to address health and safety issues related to women workers in the tea estate.





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Hema, along with her group, meets every Sundays to discuss various issues related to women's health and safety. "Child marriages used to be a huge problem here," she says. About 32 percent of women in Assam marry before they attain adulthood, according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS). "But we have held many sessions making women understand why it is harmful for girls to be married off early and the importance of education. The numbers have significantly come down."

The Mothers' clubs provide critical support for local women facing domestic violence. Hema says that previously domestic violence was widespread but now it has come down. "We try and counsel the women and also the men," she says. "And if all else fails, we don't hesitate to intervene during an episode."

While they faced resistance from the men in the beginning, Hema says they have come around

now. "When we talk about equality – about the fact that men and women are equal, and that violence is not acceptable, they listen," she says. "There was no one asking questions and so there was no accountability – now the women are much more aware, and they speak up against violence, too."

"Participating in UN Women's training sessions on safely handling gender violence, and the various legal solutions available has increased my confidence while handling such situations," she says. "We were provided with a toolkit to help drive sustained discussions on gender-based violence, health, wellness. That was extremely helpful."



RASHMI SAWRA



Rashmi is the only woman Sardarni or a supervisor, and member of the Village Defense Party at the Nonaiparai Tea Estate in Goodricke, Assam. She supervises 70 women workers at the tea estate. "I started out as a worker. However, the management saw my confidence and willingness to learn, so they appointed me as a Sardarni."





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In the last nine years, Rashmi has participated in a variety of training programmes, which she says has “increased her capacity to support other workers in her group and be actively involved with local women’s groups.” The one training by UN Women that particularly stayed with her was a training on the Tiranga Thali, an awareness session on nutrition. Tiranga thali, a government of India initiative to fight malnutrition, is not just about the colours of the Indian national flag (saffron, white, and green) but stands for a balanced high-nutrition meal comprising proteins from pulses, lentils, and meat (saffron), carbohydrates from boiled rice (white), and vitamins and minerals from leafy vegetables (green).

Rashmi has been tirelessly working in her community to raise awareness about nutritious and balanced meals, including the importance of properly washing cooking ingredients and covering the pot while cooking. “There is widespread malnutrition here, that means people here are susceptible to diseases. A good diet is the first step to correcting that,” Rashmi

says.

There is a high prevalence of under-nutrition among children, adolescent girls, and mothers in Assam. The Infant Mortality Rate is high at 48, while 38 per cent of children under five years are stunted, primarily due to insufficient nutrition. Fourteen per cent of children suffer from acute malnutrition, among them four per cent are in the category of Severe Acute Malnutrition.

“Sometimes it is just simple things like pointing out to them that instead of having tea and puffed rice, they should have boiled rice with vegetables and lentils,” she says. Rashmi tirelessly advocates healthy eating habits among her community with the help of locally available food, such as bottle gourd, cucumber, potatoes, peas and so on.

“This is especially important for women. We work throughout the day, and we are also in charge of looking after everyone else at home. We need to eat nutritious food.”



MERRY NAG

Merry has strong views, and she can articulate those views well. She uses workshops as a tool to empower women, equip them to stand up against violence, and inspire them towards a life of self-reliance.



“We do not always fully understand gender-violence. These workshops add to what we know and help us spread more awareness and encourage women and girls to speak out and seek support against violence,” says Merry Neg. “We encourage women to speak up against any kind of violence against them – we also campaign against putting young children to work.”

UN Women training sessions have also equipped her with financial knowledge. “I know how to save and invest and how to plan for a secure future and I love sharing these skills with girls and women in my community.” Merry’s work also often involves mediating incidences of domestic violence. She says the acceptability of domestic violence is on the wane now. “Men, too, know it’s wrong,” she says.

Merry is vocal about women’s unpaid caregiving, too. “We work in the gardens, and then at home, too.” But of late, she says, there have been changes in men’s attitude. “We tell them if women can go out and earn why can’t you share the household work with them?” she says. “In the beginning it was a difficult concept for them to understand as household work has so long been just a woman’s responsibility. But now I see that changing – men are helping the women by chopping vegetables, making tea, or getting the children ready for school.”

Merry, whose husband died six years back when a cooking stove exploded in their home, has not let adversities stand in her way to work for the welfare of her community, especially women and children. Today, she is confident and can easily walk up to the management to ask for measures for workers’ welfare. “These trainings have also made me aware of the organisational hierarchies – who I should take which problems to,” she says. “In the beginning I was not so confident but now I talk to them without feeling daunted. There is more respect between us now as we also come from a place of knowledge.”



CONCLUSION

Our work in the tea estates of Assam has been able to empower communities and equip them with knowledge and capacities to rebuild their lives in a more inclusive and sustainable manner post the pandemic. It has also shown us how strong and determined women can be when they are empowered – and how much they care for their communities. However, we are not done yet because the women we worked with told us plainly that they need more information on health, safety, and financial planning.

It is essential to continue to strengthen existing support systems. To stop gender-based inequalities, we must have long-term plans that involve both men and boys. There is also an urgent need to work with children and adolescents to help them unlearn the biases surrounding gender roles, including the acceptance of violence against women as normal. The programme has helped us spark an important conversation in the tea gardens of Assam – and we hope to keep it going. Overall communities have been equipped with knowledge and the capacity to rebuild their lives post COVID-19 with a renewed focus on their health, wellness, and safety.





UN Women is the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Our main focus areas include promoting women's economic empowerment, ending violence against women, advancing women's leadership and participation in decision-making, strengthening gender responsive governance including budgeting, and enhancing women's role in peace and security efforts. UN Women also works towards mainstreaming gender equality across all sectors and ensuring that women's rights and perspectives are integrated into policies and programmes at all levels.

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