

GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

FROM THE FIELD

# WOMEN IN ACTION

WOMEN'S ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES IN MAHARASHTRA





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Created by: Vishwajyoti Ghosh  
Conceptualisation and Design: Windchangers Studio  
Research support and co-ordination: Shrutika Mathur  
Guidance: Padmakshi Badoni



**UN Women** is the United Nations Entity for gender equality and women empowerment. UN Women works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide.

[www.india.unwomen.org](http://www.india.unwomen.org)



**HPPI** is a development organisation registered as a not-for-profit company under section 25 of the Companies Act, 1956, since May 1998. It is a non-political, non-religious organisation working for the holistic development of the under-privileged and marginalised people in rural and urban India. We work through social development and poverty alleviation interventions by coordinated, strategic approaches focusing on school education and teacher education, life skills, improved livelihoods, health and sanitation, women empowerment and environment protection.

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## ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Women in Action Project is working with women and girls from HIV and AIDS affected, infected and vulnerable families and their community-based organisations, to strengthen their access to formal education, decent employment and entrepreneurial opportunities in Maharashtra.

UN Women, in collaboration with Humana People to People India, initiated this project to empower HIV/AIDS affected women. The project's core objectives include providing formal education, enhancing employability skills and fostering entrepreneurship opportunities for these women.

The project supported 301 women from vulnerable families to enrol in class 10 and/or 12. Another 353 women were provided with market-oriented/employability skills and are currently gainfully employed or engaged in mainstreaming, income-generation and self-employment initiatives. Besides these tangible benefits, the project has also conducted awareness campaigns and established an enabling and supportive environment for these women to thrive and prosper.





## ABOUT THE BOOK

Giving women and girls a voice in decision-making is crucial, especially for those living with or affected by HIV and AIDS. Their involvement in creating policies ensures that these policies are designed with their needs in mind. However, to effectively participate in the fight against HIV, women and girls need both financial aid and education to develop the skills they require.

Women and girls face a higher risk of contracting HIV for two main reasons: their biological makeup makes them more susceptible to the virus, and societal inequalities often leave them with less control over their lives and health. This lack of control can lead them into situations where they're more exposed to HIV, such as not being able to negotiate safe practices in relationships.

The book "Women in Action" tells the inspiring stories of five women and girls involved in a project aimed at empowering them. Written from their perspective, these stories highlight their struggles, ambitions, and the barriers they've broken. It's a celebration of their journey towards financial independence, personal empowerment, and defining success on their own terms.

These real-life tales of hope and resilience shine a light on the power of women and girls to shape their futures. "Women in Action" is an essential read for anyone interested in the true meaning of empowerment, showcasing how women are not just surviving but thriving and leading the way in their communities.



# A SLICE OF A DREAM

SAILI,  
BHIWANDI



Isolation.  
That would be  
my word for  
growing up.

I vividly remember  
that day when my  
family was asked  
to go and live far  
away only because...



...my father was HIV+ and then he  
contracted TB. He passed away  
12 years ago leaving us here.



We'll get  
past this  
brother.



My mother (also HIV+) made ends  
meet as a health outreach worker  
and just about managed her health.



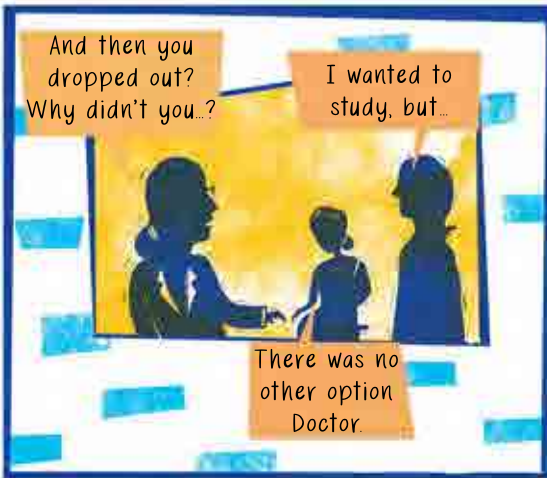
Growing up also meant slowly giving up on my dreams...



...and reconciling to my harsh reality.



I was happy to start somewhere.





I felt so relieved when my exams were over.

Hope I pass Ma!!

Let's hope for the best!



It was around the same time my teacher had other plans for me.

She suggested a course in Food and Beverages, that would enable me for skilled opportunities.

We have this popular course in our centre. Why don't you join us?

The Food sector is always looking for skilled people.



ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

At the Centre I signed up for other trainings too and that there a world of difference.

LIFESKILLS TRAINING

In life, there's no end to learning..

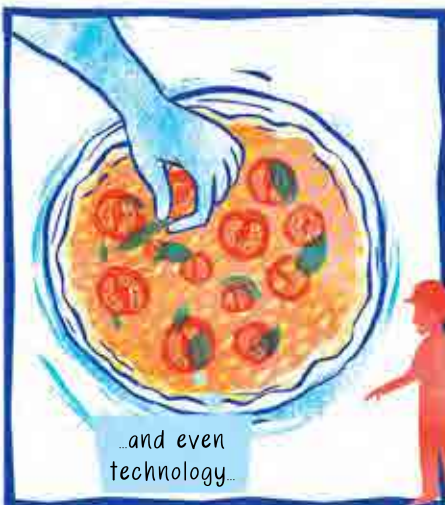



JOB FAIR

Today we are here to network and connect. All the very best!

Soon, thanks to my teacher, I got placed with a premium pizza brand! I couldn't believe myself.

Congrats Chef Saili! Bravo!





I have a much bigger dream. Soon I will mould my own future.

I will build a brand of my own. A brand that brings people closer. Where inclusion replaces isolation. And I will do it!



# STEP BY STEP

LAKSHMI,  
GOWANDI



Take heart  
Aai...

...things will get  
better, I promise

Aai and I are  
both HIV+



And we have only  
each other to take  
care of ourselves.



Being a 19 year  
old is not easy.  
Especially when...



Of course  
you'll be fine!

...in the coming  
months, I have to  
prepare for  
my XII<sup>th</sup> exams.



Look after my  
ailing mother,  
keep her in good  
spirits...



Open School  
system helps  
students like  
me.

Do odd jobs to  
keep the house  
running...



Hope I get  
a raise soon.

...and I have to  
do it all alone.  
I know that.



And I have no  
time to feel sorry  
for myself.

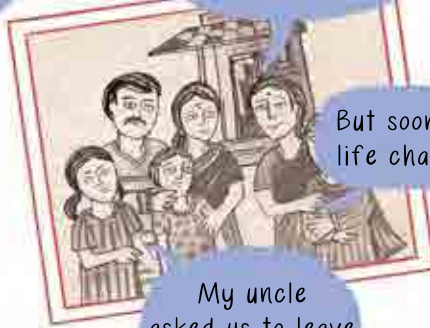
Welcome to  
my world.

I enjoy studying!



I was a decent student did well till class X

I grew up in my uncle's house, with my cousins.



But soon, our life changed.

My uncle asked us to leave his house.

I had to drop out of regular school to help Aai.



Please stay somewhere else.



They feared their kids will get infected too.

And stay away from my kids!

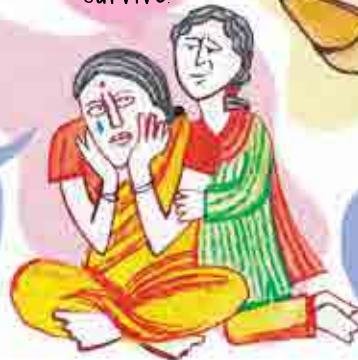
With her petty savings, Aai got this shack.



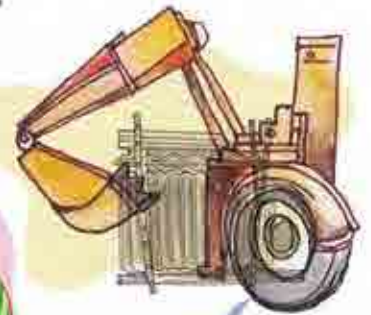
Don't worry child, we'll survive.

Yes Aai, we'll survive.

But now Aai is worried all the time. We hear that the local authorities...



...will come any day and raze all such illegal settlements.



Anyway, given the situation I am in, I can't afford to get scared now. I have to have to – put up a brave face and put my house in order.



I have no other option but to stand up with a smile.



Please try these special sweets Ma'am.

Recently, I got a job. Now on most evenings I work with a catering company as a waitress, serving guests at parties and weddings. Besides the money, I also get a good meal after the event and sometimes manage to bring some for Aai as well. She enjoys it and I love to see her happy.



I know there are no easy solutions, but things will change for the better. Step by step.

Try the Dal Makhni Aai!



Yes, they make it really well.

During the day, I regularly attend the Remedial Centre at Turbhe and their classes make me stronger.



These classes gives me so much confidence! I feel I'm learning something new everyday.

Remember, in your exams, you must...

You are the master of your life! Agree?



It is important to be aware of your status.



Here I have some close friends too. They know about my HIV status and are very supportive all the time.



Rekha, want to share some?

Sure! Thank you Lakshmi!

I will post this one on Insta.

And we love making Insta reels no?



And I will make this my profile pic!



As I have to stand up on my feet, I am very careful about my health and HIV. I regularly get myself checked by Dr Neha who helps me beyond medical issues.

Thank you for everything Doctor.

You're doing well girl. But you must come for our functions more often. You can be an inspiration for younger girls, Lakshmi.



We also have a WhatsApp group to stay in touch. We meet regularly for events that help us stay motivated round the clock.

We have to remember to have our medicines on time Aai. Never a slip.

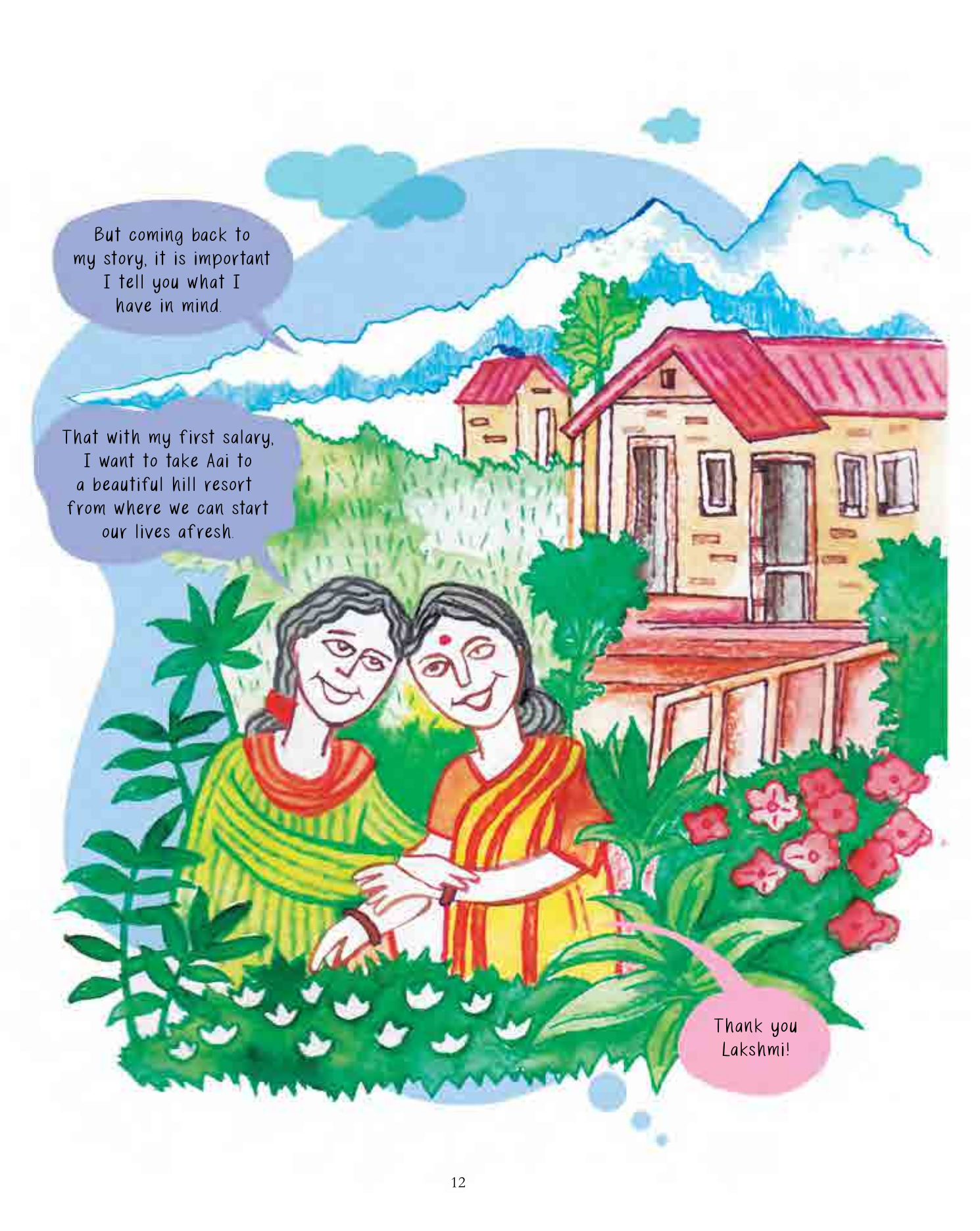


After my exams, I will look for a job that pays me well and takes care of all our needs.



I eventually want to have a pakka house for me and my mother. And I am here to get it done!





But coming back to my story, it is important I tell you what I have in mind.

That with my first salary, I want to take Aai to a beautiful hill resort from where we can start our lives afresh.

Thank you Lakshmi!

# A HOUSE OF MY OWN

SANIYA,  
BHIWANDI



Welcome. This probably is the dream home you have been looking for.



A few years back, if you had asked me to share my story, I would've laughed it off. Probably because there was nothing much to it. But now things are different. So let's say – today I feel honoured to tell you my story. I feel far more confident and happy to share my life with you with both pride and humility.



Please allow me to introduce myself.

I don't believe I have a visiting card of my own!

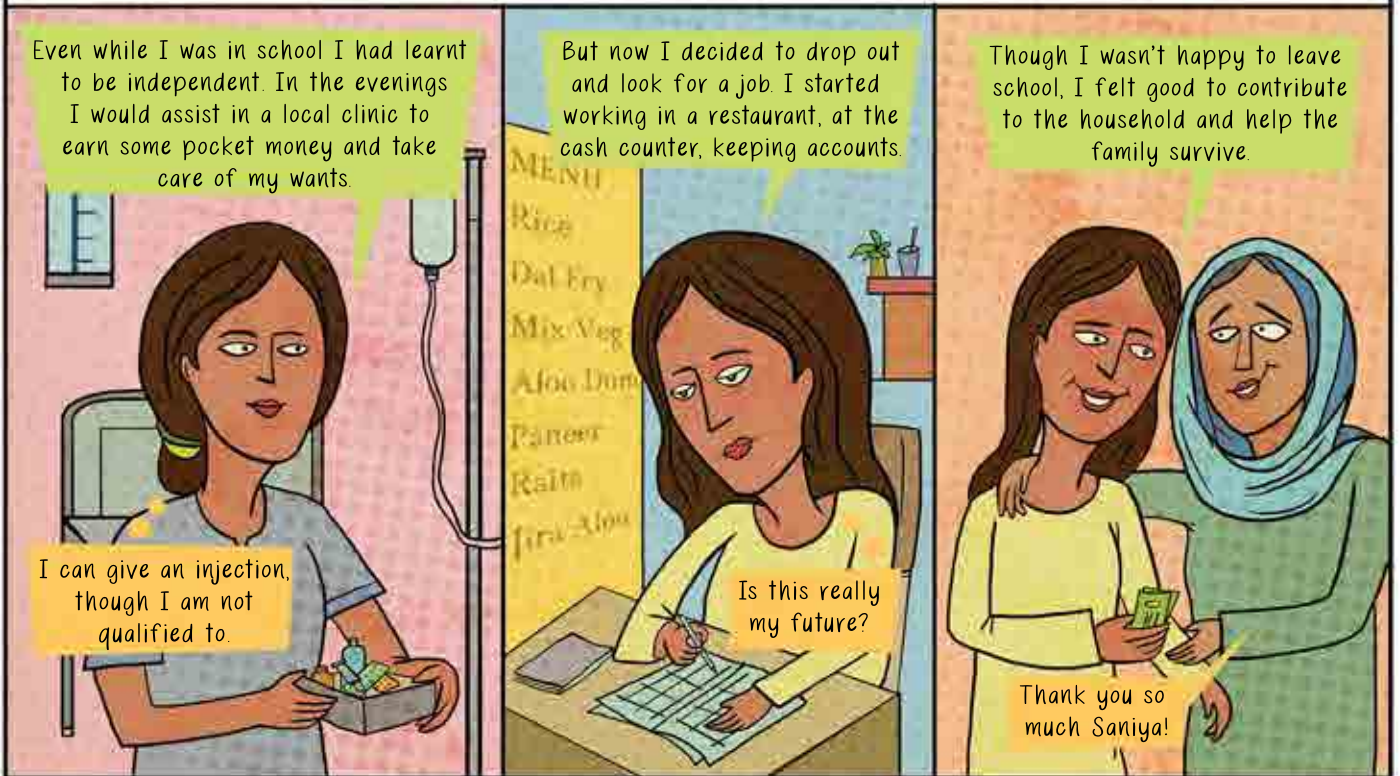
When I passed my X<sup>th</sup> with good marks I was all set to study further.



I will do even better in my XII<sup>th</sup>.

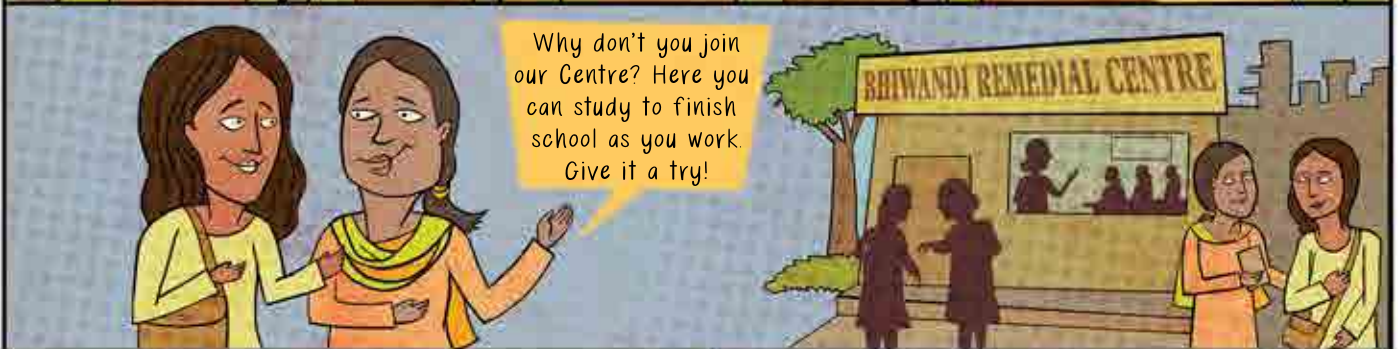


As they say – ‘life happens to you while you’re busy making other plans’. The same happened to me. Just when I was signing up for higher classes, my father just about survived a heart attack. The only earning member of such a huge family was now weak and frail. I knew I had to change my plans.





It didn't take me long to realise that life is forever a work-in-progress. It means constantly adapting to a series of changing plans. One never knows what's in store ahead, but I prepared myself to deal with it, with an open mind. One day, a chance encounter with a familiar face helped and definitely changed my life.



Life seemed to give me a send chance and I grabbed it. I just couldn't let it go. It was not only my interest but a pragmatic realisation that completing my education could get me a better life ahead. And if that meant juggling a double life between studying, working – then so be it. I was prepared to make time for it.

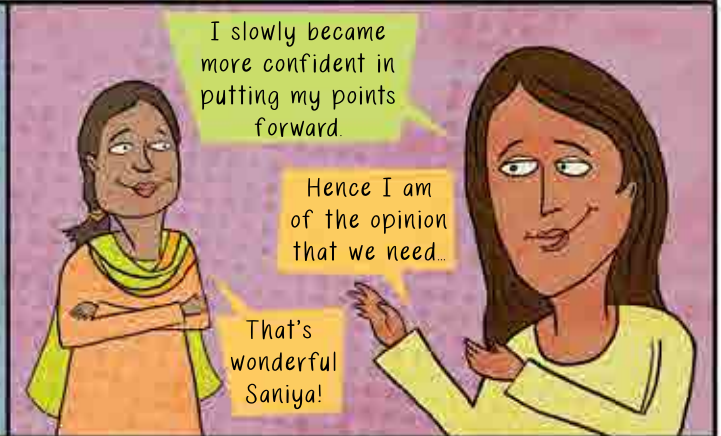
But before I progress, please allow me to digress. It's an important one. It's important because it somewhere changed me as a person and I need to tell you about it. My sessions at the centre made me aware about the life around us, challenged my stereotypical thoughts and enabled me to face my own prejudices.



I realised that education means not only academics or mark sheets. It is a sum total of many things that include personal development, an inquisitive mind and a sense of humanity. The curious me soon signed up for other classes that would help me sharpening my skills. This was more than mere normal schooling.

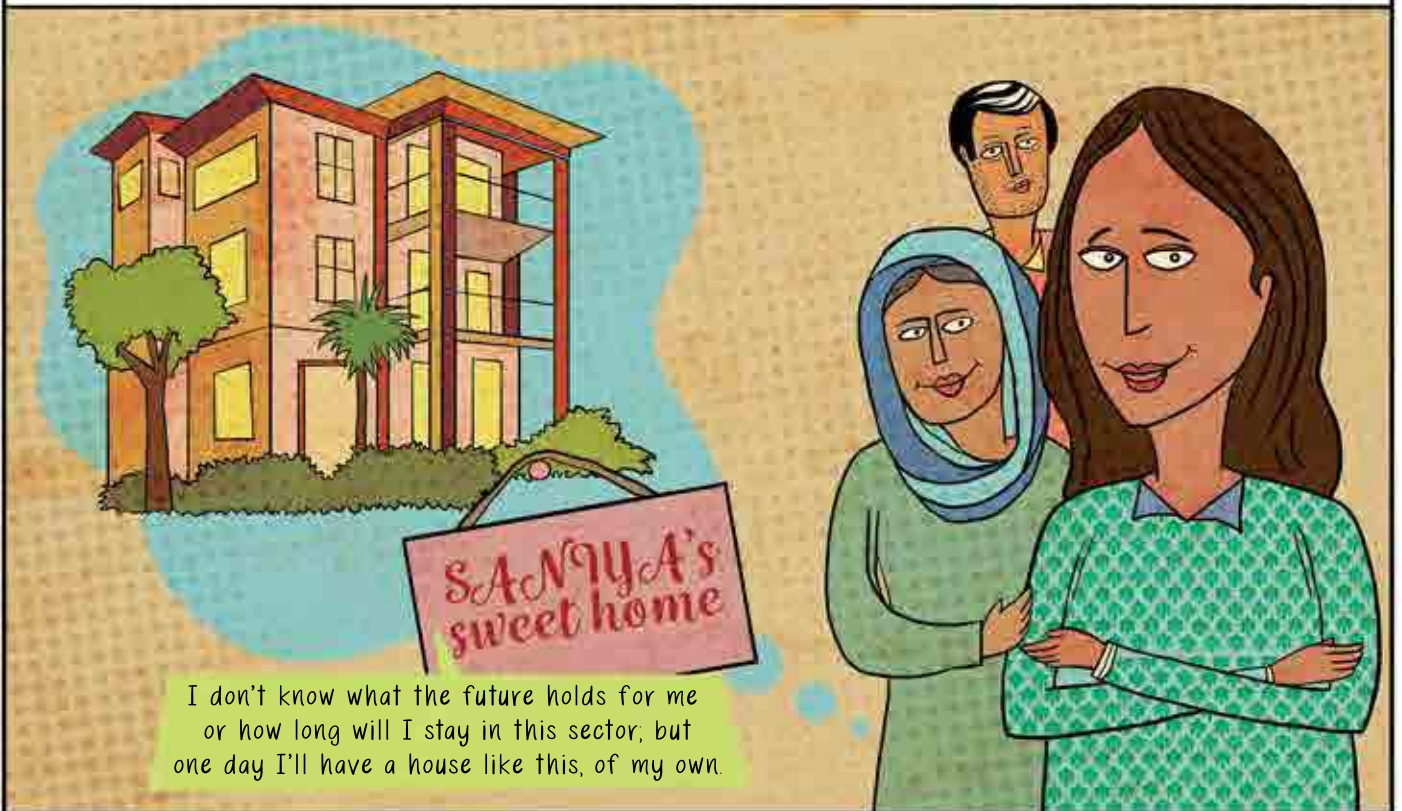


To shine, one needs commitment. And for that, one needs focus. And focus demands sacrifice. My life had changed for good. Besides my studies, I was fully committed to make something out of my life. Spending long hours at honing my skills and absolute trust in my mentor. I believe it is important to believe in someone who believes in you. I was focussed to rise above myself and my conditions with the support I had.





As I said at the very beginning, today things are different. I am earning more than anyone in my family could ever think of. I am making sure that everybody's needs are taken care of I am not saying I've arrived, but that I've only just begun. And yes, I am preparing for my exams too. Wish me luck!



# MY RESTART RECIPE

SUNITA,  
BHIWANDI

As a homemaker, I have a sorted domestic life. A working husband, school going children, all checked.

My husband leaves early in the morning on his job of a school bus driver.



But once everyone left for the day and I was alone in the house, a feeling of emptiness would fill me in.

Then my children leave for school too.



I want to go out and work. But then I'm 42, who'll employ me?

I would remember my school days and how much I enjoyed studying.



I was beginning to realise that my life was missing a sense of purpose. I wanted more out of my life than just domestic chores.

But I had to discontinue school for domestic responsibilities.

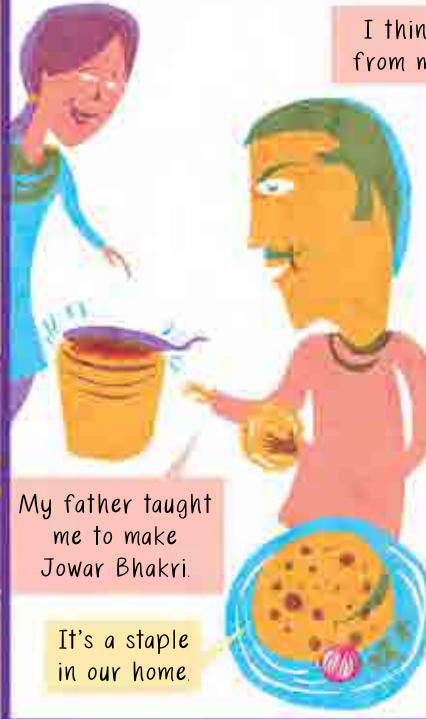


To tell you a bit about myself, I love cooking, trying new recipes.



You can call it my passion.

I think I got it from my parents.



My father taught me to make Jowar Bhakri.

It's a staple in our home.



My mother taught me to make Puran Poli.

Now, I make it really well.

Is it too late to start now?



You may brush it off by calling it my 'midlife crisis', but I was at that stage of my life when I didn't want my remaining half life to be half-lived. I was sure to get out of my comfort zone and complete my unfinished aspirations, within my given situation.

A bit of research helped and I braced myself to press the Restart button.



I signed up to be the oldest school girl in my class.

I found a place to redress my dream, to complete my school education.



It felt good to step out of home with a sense of purpose instead of being tied daily to drudgery of domestic chores.

Hmm...this geography is rather interesting...



Besides academics, I also started attending other classes to help me build myself.

Start with visualising the life you want.



I was now in a happy space. To go out, interact with the world, learn new things and bring them home. It was a new life for me and I realised how important the Restart button can be. And even for a moment, I never felt embarrassed about my age.

THINK BIG  
START SMALL



An idea is as good as its execution.

You mean I too can be an Entrepreneur?

I now started finding my world. At home I was now connecting better with my kids too. Now my house had not two but three students.



How was your school today, beta...

It was good Aai, how was yours?

Step by step, I was on a journey towards making something out of my life. Thinking of new ideas along the way, stumbling but walking ahead. I now had to get out of my comfort zone.

One day, a casual query triggered my dormant dream, pushing me to act.



Didi, do you provide lunch meals? I heard that your cook...

It's high time I did. If not now then when?

Though I did not have the money, I decided to take the plunge. A prospective customer believed in me.



All the best Sunita didi!

Rs 2,000/-

Thank you so much for this!



Hello and welcome to my kitchen!

The word started getting around and my orders started going up.

Thus, within a few months, I restarted my life. I was realising the worth of my skills.



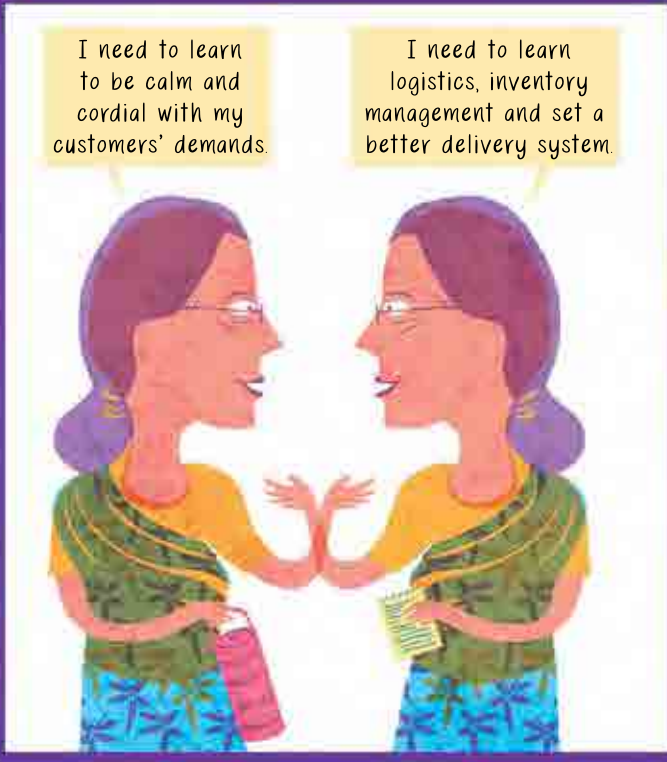
Am I dreaming? Will I be able to do this?

Moving mountains of self doubt, I was now committed to my new found sense of confidence and the world responded.





Even though every journey begins with a single step, the road ahead unfolds in rather interesting ways. I have had to prepare myself for challenges along the way, learning as I moved ahead



Today, living a mundane domestic life appears impossible for me. The centre's support has instilled confidence in me. My family's and now the customer's faith in me has stirred the desire to be and do my best. I wouldn't let them down.

Recently I took my exams for class XII I felt so proud to have my son as my history teacher at home.



During the Freedom Movement...



I hope I can keep up with your efforts Beta!



Before I leave, there's one last thing I would share from my experience. That it's never ever too late in life and I am living it. Call me ambitious and I will never shy away from my ambition to be an entrepreneur, but before that – to be an educated person who can help women like me.



# MOVING AHEAD

NAMITA\*,  
AMBERNATH



\*Name changed for privacy reasons



I have grown up here with my mother as my sole guardian.

Aai, you're the strongest!

Some years back I learnt I was HIV+. But my mother didn't panic and made sure we were on the right track.

Don't worry dear, I met the doctor. We need to take our medicines on time, and stay healthy. We'll be fine child.

She made sure I continue going to school and take my medicines regularly.

I promise I won't dissappoint you Aai.


I have a suggestion...

..don't tell your friends about this.


Your HIV status might push your friends away.

So, fearing stigma, I thus learnt to grow up in silence.

But I always wanted to make something out of my life!




I now started getting interested in my studies and much to my surprise, I started doing well too.



This Powerpoint is so cool! I should explore more of this...


My curiosity got the better of me. I found out and joined free computer classes in the evenings.



I was in X<sup>th</sup> when one day my teacher called me.

You're bright! After X<sup>th</sup>, you should continue till XII<sup>th</sup> and finish school Namita.

You know how things are at home, teacher...



I just couldn't believe it when I passed my X<sup>th</sup> with good marks. Yet I was torn apart between my dreams and duties.

I have to stop going to school and start working. I have to support Aai.

I took up a job at a local factory making ice cream wrappers for a salary of Rs 9,000 per month.



I guess this is my life from here on. I'll get used to it.



With my first salary I will buy a nice bag.

The thrill of getting paid was something I will never forget! Now I could support my mother and save a bit for myself too!



Little did I know, my life will change again.



I got used to my new life. Though I missed school, I was happy to spend more time with my mother. But then, one day she did it again.

Namita, here you can attend classes to finish your school education while working. Interested?

TURBHE REMEDIAL CENTRE



Very much! Thank you Aai!

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT



It all starts with Empathy...

At the Centre, besides the regular classes, I started attending Life Skills classes too.

These classes are even more interesting!



BUSINESS BASICS

Each big idea starts with a small step...

Will I be able to do my own business someday?



Now I was class in XII, the final year of school education. With exams coming closer, I felt I needed more hours to study

Sir, can I please get some leave. My exams are close. Please!

I worked hard and took the exams, half nervous and half confident.

Sure Namita All the very best!

I don't believe I am going to complete school!

From a family struggling to survive, I realised I have made progress. But then this was just the beginning. After my exams I wasted no time looking for a better job.

Learn computer basics  
Finish school  
start applying!

We would be happy to have you in our sales team...

Somebody pinch me!

...with a starting salary of Rs 16,000 per month.

Thank you so much for this opportunity!

And here I am today Off to work!

I have to visit local stores, take sales orders and meet my monthly targets.

Now I am more than my medical status. I am careful about my health, my medicines and my HIV status is not an issue.

I want to climb up the corporate ladder with hard work and integrity.

Please visit us next month too madam.

Congratulations! You're promoted.



And once I get my house in order, the one thing I really want to do is – make a centre, a home, where I can help anyone in need, free of any bias or stigma. A safe haven where no one is silenced. One may say its a lofty ambition, but it's the only one I have.











**HUMANA**  
PEOPLE TO PEOPLE INDIA