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WHEN WOMEN LEAD



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Published in India.

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Produced by UN Women India.

Supported by the Ford Foundation.

हम

WHEN WOMEN LEAD





अमिताभ कांत
Amitabh Kant
जी20 शेरपा
G20 Sherpa



सत्यमेव जयते



Message

I extend my warm greetings to all as we celebrate the strides made in the realm of Women-Led Development.

India's journey towards progress comes at a crucial juncture, where the world seeks to build back better from a series of crises. From the COVID-19 pandemic to the ongoing climate crisis, it is evident that these challenges often bear a gendered burden, impacting women and girls disproportionately.

As we navigate through these complexities, I firmly believe in the transformative power of women-led growth. Empowerment of women isn't just a matter of equity; it is a strategic imperative for sustainable development and inclusive growth.

In recent times, India has undergone a transformative journey in recognizing the pivotal role of women in development, and this book stands as a testament to the significant strides we have made. The narratives woven within these pages resonate with the impact of transformative policies, initiatives, and programs championed by the Government to empower women across diverse sectors. From education and healthcare to entrepreneurship and leadership roles, our commitment to fostering women-led development remains unwavering.

My heartfelt congratulations to the UN Women and Ford team for crafting this exceptional book. I trust that its influence will extend far beyond its pages, shaping policy discourse and fostering greater investment in gender equality and women's empowerment initiatives in the years to come.



(Amitabh Kant)

Place: New Delhi

Dated: 26-02-2024



वैश्वेव कुटुम्बकम्
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MESSAGE

RESHMA ANAND

Regional Director, South Asia (India, Nepal, Sri Lanka)

Ford Foundation

The genesis of this book was a conversation about remarkable women we have met in the course of our work and our frustration that their stories are not part of mainstream leadership narratives. I've been working at the grassroots for over 25 years and often come back home with powerful memories of the resourcefulness and courage of women leaders I have met during community or project visits. Their struggles are real but what stands out are ways in which they deconstruct problems, create strategies, build allies, influence stakeholders, raise resources, pivot when assumptions are challenged, and persist with community members—characteristics that would normally qualify for leadership lore!

What started as a conversation is today the book in your hands. हम | *When Women Lead* is dedicated to demonstrating the many facets of women who lead in India, abundant with stories that exemplify the resilience, creativity, and unwavering spirit of 75 women who overcame societal barriers, addressed pressures of cultural norms and expectations, and persevered despite discrimination. These stories are as much about their challenges as their competence, potential, and significant achievements. They demonstrate the diverse talents of women leaders and make a compelling case for gender equality and a more equitable society.

So what happens when women lead? As you meet women profiled in हम, a few facets of women's leadership are confirmed:

- They create innovative solutions grounded in local contexts and needs;
- They foster inclusive decision-making processes, amplifying marginalized voices;
- They transcend personal gains and become catalysts for building resilient communities;
- They push for the long haul and sustainable development;
- They deploy empathy and conflict resolution skills to enhance cohesion and morale;
- They cultivate networks, charting a path for future generations of women leaders.

These 75 stories depict the contribution of India's women leaders in creating resilient, equitable, and thriving communities, collectives, and organizations. Studies back this, and research continues to prove the value of investing in women leaders.

The emphasis placed by Prime Minister Modi on fostering women-led development to drive India's economic advancement and foster social progress is deeply aligned with this belief. हम is a call to galvanize commitment towards supporting women's leadership (beyond their presence and participation) to solve the complex, wicked problems that we face today. It is time to normalize how women lead in various fields—creating transformational change and outcomes that benefit their communities, organizations, and countries. The question is no longer about 'Why women leaders?' It's time to ask instead 'How can we support India's vibrant women leaders?'



FOREWORD

SUSAN J FERGUSON

Country Representative

UN Women India

UN Women is proud to present हम | *When Women Lead* as a tribute, not just to the resilient spirit of women leaders in India, but also their concrete contributions to nation building.

Coinciding with India's G20 Presidency in 2023, which emphatically focused on women-led development, this project, sponsored by UN Women and generously funded by the Ford Foundation, is not just a collection of stories; it's an examination of women's leadership as a key trigger of social transformation and progress.

हम is a compelling anthology that brings together the extraordinary stories of resilient women from various parts of India, each overcoming societal barriers and personal challenges to create meaningful change in their communities. These narratives, collected by our all-women team of writers and photographers, are testament to the change that is possible when women lead.

From Drishana Kalita's puppetry in Assam challenging gender violence, to Garvita Gulhati's 'Why Waste?' initiative in Bengaluru, these tales capture diverse landscapes in India, showcasing women as agents of change. Thinlas Chorol in Ladakh breaks into the male-dominated world of tourism, while Gayatri Suman in Chhattisgarh wields the law for social justice. This anthology, enriched by stories of pioneers like Harshini Kanhekar, India's first woman fire officer, and many more, reflects the unyielding spirit of women transforming societal norms. हम is a tribute to the extraordinary journeys of ordinary women who rewrite their destinies and, in turn, shape ours.

हम | *When Women Lead* underscores the critical importance of investing in women's empowerment and leadership. Each story in this collection is a pathway for future generations, highlighting the strength found in unity, and demonstrating the extraordinary role women play in crafting a better world.



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INTRODUCTION

URVASHI BUTALIA

As you turn the pages of this book, you will meet women from all corners of India. Confident, strong, smiling, focused, they invite you to read their stories, meet their communities, ‘listen’ to their voices. We are women, they tell you, single, mothers, aunts, daughters, grandmothers. We do many things: we’re farmers, we fly planes, we’re technicians and scientists and engineers, we teach, we embroider, we’re activists, we work with water, and seeds, and crops, with trees and forests, with disability and marginalization and so much more. Sometimes our families support us, at others they don’t, sometimes they learn, over time, to do so. Our journeys haven’t been easy, but they have been worthwhile. And we’re only a miniscule, a tiny fragment of the enormous pool of talent that exists among us.

The stories here, are gathered and put together by another set of women, listeners and writers and photographers, designers and editors. As you read them and meet the women in their beautiful photographs, you will become familiar with words such as ‘courage’ and ‘determination’, ‘barriers’, ‘difficulties’, ‘support’ and not least, ‘dreams and desires’. Every woman here carried a dream in her heart—sometimes it was as simple as wanting an education, sometimes it was seeking a better life for her family, at others it was wanting to touch the skies. And as these stories tell us, all it takes for a woman to fiercely

own and work to make her dream come true, is the smallest of opportunities. Give her that and she will surmount even the most formidable of obstacles.

The 75 stories here mark 75 years of India’s independence, a fitting moment to pay tribute to half its population. They also direct us to the wisdom that lies in women’s stories. They remind us of the ways in which these stories, ostensibly ‘small’, touch on so many of the wider issues of our time. When a woman saves and works with seeds, or she harvests water, she is addressing climate change, when she seeks education, she’s asking for the knowledge that will enable her to be a citizen in full measure, when she begins to earn an income, she contributes to the overall economy, both personal and private.

In many ways, these are inspirational stories. Young and old women reading them will know that given a chance, for women, the sky is the limit. Their power lies not only in the individual story, but in that of the collective, the *हम* of the title, the ‘we’ and ‘us’ of our lives, the coming together of the many little stories that make up the experiential base of women’s lives.

Read them, you will not be disappointed.





AMLA LAKRA

GUMLA, JHARKHAND

“मैंने याव आखूं वरयांगे कोरां
में बच्चा उंच कुझो स्कूल में
पढेला।”

“I work hard, because I want my son to study in a good
school.”



Amla Bhaleriya Lakra's journey embodies the belief that true leadership is planting seeds of growth and nurturing them together, where every hand that joins in the effort strengthens the roots of collective success.

"I am determined to reach great heights as a woman farmer," says Amla Bhaleriya Lakra. As the sun rises over the horizon in Gumla village in Jharkhand, Amla watches the light settling on her fields and her heart is filled with joy. This, the planting, the nurturing, the growing, the cropping, is what she and her sisters in the village have worked so hard to achieve. They've done it together, each one teaching and learning from the other. This is a joy like no other.

It wasn't always like this, though. Before they came back to their home

Previous page: Amla takes a break from working in her mango orchard.

This page: Amla walks through her vegetable nursery.

Page on right: Amla shares some moments with her Mahila Mandal.





village of Gumla, Amla and her husband worked hard, and unsuccessfully, to make their lives in the city. Once back, they turned to agriculture, but this too wasn't easy. They lacked technical knowledge, irrigation facilities were poor, and they didn't have the money to buy the kinds of seeds and fertilisers they needed.

Despairing, Amla connected with a local Self-Help Group (SHG), the Jagriti Mahila Sakhi Mandal. Now, she could get small loans to invest in farming. The SHG led her to JOHAR, a World Bank-funded livelihood-intensive project implemented by the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society. JOHAR helped her turn her life around, she became a rural entrepreneur and soon, she was able to share her expertise in solar lift-irrigation, cropping, organic farming, poly-nursery houses, with other women, helping them to change their lives, too.

Amla also joined the Mahila Kisan Producers Group Phathi, and began to cultivate tomatoes, broccoli, peas, cauliflower and cabbage. She was also the first farmer to grow tomatoes which brought her a five-fold return on her investment. And now she says, "I travel everywhere to provide training to farmers; there is so much women can do."

Amla now earns well, she has built a pucca (concrete) house for her family, she economically empowers other women, and most importantly, she is educating her son in a good school.

"So many women are earning well from farming," she says. "It makes me very happy that I could play a role in it."

हम हैं अंतर्मन ज्वाला
I am Inner Fire





ARCHANA MANE

*OSMANABAD,
MAHARASHTRA*

“जेव्हा एक स्त्री अडथळे
तोडून तिच्या प्रवासाला
निघते, तेव्हा इतरांनाही असे
करण्याची प्रेरणा मिळते।”

*“When one woman breaks barriers and sets out
on her journey, she inspires others to do so too.”*



Archana's life changed dramatically when she had to beg her neighbors for just ₹150 to treat her sick son. Rising expenses and growing debts became regular troubles for her. "I couldn't sleep at night, thinking about our debts," she remembers. "I knew I had to do something."

She was, however, no stranger to poverty. As a child growing up in Ansurda village in Osmanabad district in Maharashtra, Archana's family did not even have enough money for the basic necessities in life. Education was a distant dream. But determined young Archana managed to enrol herself in a nearby school and borrowed books from kind classmates and teachers to study. She became the only one among her siblings to be formally educated.

Previous page: Archana Mane during a training session with members of the Manjari Sakhi Producer Company.

Page on left: Archana Mane: community leader, entrepreneur, and farmer.

Page on right: Archana Mane trains other women members about organic farming.

Next page: Archana Mane shares a light moment with other women members of her self-help group.





Years later, facing financial difficulties again, Archana's fighting spirit was awakened once more. Being educated, she understood well the need for financial stability and being able to add to the family income. She bought a sewing machine with whatever little money she had saved, so she could earn some money by stitching clothes for the villagers. Soon, Archana was able to supplement what her rickshaw-puller husband earned.

But Archana didn't stop there. She completed her Bachelor's Degree and worked on her leadership skills, becoming a community leader, entrepreneur, and farmer. With these new skills, she was ready to make a difference. During a four-year drought in Marathwada, Archana played a key role in promoting drought-resistant vegetables to ensure food security. She led her village in building water harvesting structures, which helped raise groundwater levels. She also fought for women's financial independence, helped start small businesses, and advocated for water conservation.

Now, as a member of the Board of Directors of Manjari Sakhi Producer Company, a women-led farming group that works on developing a sustainable and fair oilseed and pulses

value chain in Osmanabad, Archana has influenced the lives of over 70,000 people. "We all face countless problems in life, but together, as women, we can find solutions," she says. "When one woman breaks barriers and sets out on a journey, other women are inspired to do so too."

Archana's work within her community, initiating change from the ground up, her ability to inspire and motivate others, particularly in her role in leading community initiatives for drought resistance and financial independence, is a story of rising from the roots, lifting not just herself but the entire community, turning adversities into opportunities for collective growth and empowerment.

Her work is deeply rooted in her personal experiences and her community's needs. She exemplifies how individual resilience can translate into community strength, and her story is a testament to the power of grassroots and transformational leadership in creating meaningful, lasting change.

हम हैं उड़ान
I am Flight



MALAN MEMORIAL WOMEN DAIRY TRAINING CENTER & MODEL FARM

Malan Memorial (1st Feb 1955 - 28th March 2022) was an Indian social worker and Shikshan Prayog. She is well known for her women-led dairy cooperative, Latur, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu. Under Malan's leadership, the center provides a range of services to support women's entrepreneurship and leadership, including financial services, skill building, and livelihood generation plans. The center's goal is to empower women farmers and enrich the rural economy. The center's activities include training of women dairy farmers, access to formal markets, and financial services.

मलान (1 फेब्रुवारी 1955 - 28 मार्च 2022) ही भारतीय समाज कार्यकर्ता आणि शिक्षण प्रयोग, जी ती महिला-चालित दूध सहकारी, लतूर, महाराष्ट्र, आणि तामिळ नाडू, भारतात प्रसिद्ध आहे. मलान यांच्या नेतृत्वाखाली, केंद्राने महिलांच्या उद्योजकतेला आणि नेतृत्वाला पाठिंब्यासाठी अनेक सेवा प्रदान केल्या आहेत, ज्यात वित्तीय सेवा, कौशल्य निर्माण आणि उद्योग विनिर्माण योजनांचा समावेश आहे. केंद्राचा उद्देश महिला कृषकाला सशक्त करणे आणि ग्रामीण अर्थव्यवस्थेला समृद्ध करणे आहे. केंद्राच्या कामकाजात महिला दूध उत्पादकांना प्रशिक्षण देणे, ग्रामीण बाजारपेठांना प्रवेश देणे आणि वित्तीय सेवा प्रदान करणे यांचा समावेश आहे.

as it assures regular income, and organic matter for the animals. Malan Raut, a progressive women farmer, developed a model dairy farm to generate regular income for her family.

ed to the rearing of milch animals by a farmer family. For the animals to move around, proper feeding and care is essential. The center's aim is to train and encourage women to improve their lives.

। शेतासाठी नियमित उत्पन्न, आणि पशूंना योग्य अन्न देणे आणि स

MALAN RAUT

LATUR, MAHARASHTRA

“माझ्यासाठी ठरवलेल्या सीमारेषेत राहिले असते तर मी फार काही करू शकले नसते।”

“If I'd stayed within the boundaries set for me, I could not have done much.”



Every woman will recognize the boundaries Malan is speaking of: financial constraints (Malan comes from a small village in Latur district in Maharashtra), early marriage (she was married while still in her 12th grade), the pressures of running a household and raising a family, opposition from the in-laws to her plans to work outside the home.

But while there were difficulties, there was also inspiration, and the stories of women leaders led Malan to think of expanding her horizons. She attended training sessions on sustainable agriculture and entrepreneurship, and started to implement these on her own half acre of land, focusing on

Page on right: (top left) Malan Raut leads a games and interactive session at SSP's professional women's workshop.

(Top right) Malan Raut trains SSP members on utilization of a biogas plant at her farm.

(Bottom) Malan Raut explains how to work a manual tree-planting machine at an SSP workshop.

Next page: Malan Raut prepares for a training session on farming.





organic fruit and vegetables. Later, she expanded this focus on sustainable agriculture to the 2.5 acre family farm and then diversified into agri-allied businesses such as goat and poultry rearing, and dairy.

At every step she involved women, and worked to build their capacities. As she says, “I want to make more women financially independent because with income comes greater control.”

Very soon, the climate-smart farming techniques she had perfected became examples for women’s groups, farmers, agriculture students, and government officials to learn from. Alongside this work, there were other heights to scale and among her achievements, Malan can now count fruit orchards that grow 16 different fruit varieties and provide a steady income to the family.

Not content with her own success, Malan began to mobilize women’s groups to lobby with local government departments and banks, to access finances for their businesses. Malan herself became a trainer and mentor, supporting thousands of women in adopting her farming techniques and thereby contributing to food security.

Malan Raut’s story is a powerful illustration of the impact an individual can have in transforming not just their own life but also empowering a community. Her leadership model, rooted in empowerment, sustainable practices, and inclusivity, highlights the potential for women to be agents of change in traditionally male-dominated fields.

Her greatest joy and satisfaction, as she says, come from helping other women, making her a true role model in empowering leadership.

हम हैं नारी शक्ति
I am Female Power





DRISHANA KALITA

GUWAHATI, ASSAM

“Every challenge I faced was an opportunity to find new pathways for challenging traditions that took away the dignity of Assamese women.”



As a young girl, Drishana fell in love with puppetry and wanted to become a puppeteer. She watched these shows wide-eyed, and was transported to different worlds through the magical storytelling of the puppeteers—stories that wove together myth and legend, laced with personal wisdom and humour. As she grew older, her interest in puppetry remained with her. But now she was also acutely aware of the world around her, especially the violence that women had to confront on a daily basis. “I saw a fair amount of gender violence in my childhood, which troubled me,” she says. “I also noticed that traditional puppetry was becoming almost extinct. I felt like I could do something that combined both.”

She decided to revive the art of

Previous page: A performance by Drishana Kalita’s group Puppet People, in collaboration with a local non-profit, in Morigaon in September, 2023.

This page: Close up of a puppet from the performance in Morigaon.

Page on right: Behind the scenes activities before the show and a glimpse of the enthralled audience, including children, in Morigaon.

Next page: Drishana Kalita shares a fun moment with her team members after the show.





puppetry, with a focus on empowering women and changing the narratives of folk stories. She started her own group, Puppet People, and began to work with women writers to develop scripts, particularly those that rewrote the misogyny in folk stories.

Through this medium, the troupe began to address a range of issues—child marriage, girls’ education, sanitation, menstruation and more. They worked with local NGOs and the community to find appropriate solutions to local problems. The shows opened up spaces for conversation where these issues could be discussed.

“We tackle sensitive topics like gender violence by subtly raising awareness. This resonates with the community and encourages dialogue, and sometimes sparks off conversations on subjects previously considered taboo,” she says. Drishana created the first ever puppet show in the Sadri language, which is used by the state’s tea tribes. The use of their language encouraged the tea tribes to take part in conversations on difficult issues such as teenage pregnancies and human trafficking.

None of this was easy. Drishana herself had found it difficult to balance family and work, and financial constraints made it an onerous task to access remote areas. But over time, the trust she built with her audiences, meant that she and her troupe were able to reach their messages to the audience. With her vision as inspiration, and the support of her family and community as motivation, Drishana is all set to expand into newer areas such as cultural tourism. “I don’t regret anything; life’s been a great teacher. Just wish I’d started doing this sooner,” she says.

Drishana’s innovative use of puppetry to address and transform traditional narratives, particularly those involving gender, her approach to reviving an almost extinct art form for social commentary and change, is the hallmark of a leader who sees and utilizes creativity as a powerful tool for communication and influence. Her story is an inspiring example of how creative expression can be a powerful tool for advocacy and leadership in driving social transformation.

I am a Community Storyteller





MOUSHUMI CHOU DHURY

PURULIA, WEST BENGAL

“Our dreams will see
the light of the day.”



When the drumbeats roll and the music rises up rhythmically, 25-year old Moushumi Choudhury, the first female Chau dancer from Purulia, feels herself transformed into the goddess Durga: her body vibrates, her eyes dilate, she is filled with passion and energy and she feels invincible. It's as if the most powerful deity with ten hands, who stands for devi and shakti (woman and power) has come to reside in her.

Previous page: Moushumi Choudhury as Ma Durga, an Indian goddess associated with strength and divine prowess.

This page: Moushumi Choudhury rehearses with her troupe before an impending performance.

Page on right: Behind the scene activities of Moushumi Choudhury preparing for a performance along with team members and her father, the renowned Chau dancer, Jagannath Choudhury.

Next page: Moushumi Choudhury stands with some of her women team members with intricate masks of goddesses and demons in their hands, which are worn during Chau performances.





Purulia Chau is an acrobatic mask dance, a variation of the Chau dance that figures on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. For Moushumi, Durga's ten hands symbolize the many battles she has waged as a leader in her small village in one of the most backward districts of West Bengal.

Here, she works to change patriarchal mindsets, and argues for women to become Chau dancers, something that has remained the preserve of men. "Women can excel at this dance. I encourage everyone to take it up. It's agile, it requires flexibility and the mental make up to take on this challenge."

For as long as she can remember, Moushumi wanted to be a Chau dancer. She took inspiration from her father, Jagannath Choudhury, a renowned Chau artist himself. Now, she runs her own troupe of 200 rural women dancers. It wasn't so long ago that this seemed impossible. She remembers how she

had to deal with the wrath of her village when she wanted to dance. She was told to 'leave it to the men.

But she wasn't going to do that. And the perseverance paid off. Today, Moushumi is a nationally and internationally recognized Chau dancer and has won awards such as the Asia Pacific Youth ICH Storytelling Award. And, from being a relatively less known and somewhat backward place, Purulia is now a tourist destination. Much of this is thanks to Moushumi, the woman who performed Chau when she was six months pregnant. As she says, "I am devoted to Chau and will ensure that it endures."

Moushumi's story illustrates how passion, combined with strong leadership, can bring about significant social and cultural change.

हम हैं दृढ़ प्रतिज्ज्ञ
I am Determined





PABIBEN RABARI

KACHCHH, GUJARAT

“I am not very highly educated and yet I am running a successful business. Women should not doubt themselves—if they set their mind to do something, they will do it.”



Pabiben lost her father when she was just five. Her mother, a labourer, worked hard in the fields and the responsibility of looking after her younger sisters fell on Pabiben. There was no time to study, whatever spare time she had was spent on helping her mother support the family.

The Rabari community, to which Pabiben belongs, are nomadic herders from northwest India and parts of Pakistan. Pabiben explains, “Our men are herders, and the women work on intricate embroideries for clothes.” Pabiben inherited the art of embroidery from the women in her family.

Previous page: Pabiben surrounded by her team of talented women artisans.

This page: Pabiben captured in a moment of heartfelt laughter.

Page on right: Pabiben and her team of talented women artisans present the crafts of her brand, alongside a close look at the intricate Rabari embroidery that defines her brand.

Next page: Pabiben Rabari surrounded by intricately embroidered bags and purses from her brand.





She recalls that their village saw a constant to and fro of NGOs who would come in, involve the women, and take their work to sell. “I didn’t like that,” Pabiben says, “our community’s work was sold in markets under different labels, and we did not get the credit or even enough money. Why could we not sell under our own names?”

It was Pabiben’s husband who suggested she start her own business—this, he said, would not only allow the local women to earn but would also help in showcasing their art. Two individuals, Dr Nilesh Priyadarshi and Nupur Kumar stepped in to help and soon, Pabiben and her village sisters had set up a business.

They created a brand called Pabiben.com. “We decided to adopt an innovative approach. We combined traditional art with modern machinery and introduced new products to customers.” Their products became very popular, and the market grew.

Soon, Pabiben and her colleagues put another initiative in place, the Karigar Clinic, a three-month training programme, a rural business venture that enables artisans to become entrepreneurs. Today, the company’s portfolio has more than 80 products, from clothes to mobile covers. Pabiben remembers the time they were seen as ‘outsiders’ (this is the literal meaning of the word Rabari). Today, she knows her story is not hers alone, but that of the collective struggle of her community. As she says, “If one recognizes the skills of artisans, they can make a name for themselves.”

Pabiben’s journey from a young girl burdened with early responsibilities to a successful entrepreneur is a tale of turning traditional skills into a thriving business. Her leadership has helped to uplift her community and to also preserve and promote the rich heritage of Rabari embroidery.

हम हैं शक्ति
I am Power





PRIYANKA MOHAN

BENGALURU, KARNATAKA

“I find inspiration in many people, from my grandmother to my two-year-old daughter; my students also inspire me with their dedication.”



“Empower and embrace yourself by truly believing in your abilities, while actively crafting opportunities for your own success,” is Priyanka Mohan’s advice for her fellow women.

Born in Bengaluru, but with her roots in the coastal Udupi district of Karnataka, Priyanka grew up in a household filled with dance and music, and in particular, the local theatre form called Yakshagana (roughly translated as ode to nature).

Largely male dominated, Yakshagana was not very hospitable to women. For Priyanka, who was a shy, introverted child, it was even more difficult to come out of her shell and embrace the form. Instead, she decided to study to be an engineer.

Previous page: Priyanka Mohan teaches students Yakshagana at her dance studio.

This page: Priyanka Mohan, dressed as Lord Krishna, a Hindu god, on the steps of her house.

Page on right: Priyanka Mohan getting ready for a performance.

Next page: Priyanka Mohan caught in a powerful moment from her impromptu Yakshagana performance on the street outside her home.





But Yakshagana stayed in her heart; it had shaped her family's identity. As a child, she'd been part of the organization her father had set up to promote Yakshagana. Now it was her turn. Priyanka began the process of becoming a teacher of Yakshagana. It wasn't easy: the biggest hurdle was that she was female, and much of her community was deeply conservative. They could not accept the idea of a female Yakshagana performer.

Priyanka refused to give up, and went on to become a much-loved teacher. She leveraged platforms like YouTube to bring Yakshagana to eager students and over time, she became a key figure in the preservation of the art. She also brought Yakshagana into unusual places, such as corporate settings, for leadership and team building exercises. She is now the art director of Yakshadegula, a school set up by her father. "My future goal is to establish an art collective where young artists can pursue their passion without worrying about financial stability," she says, and goes on to add, "I find inspiration in many people, from my grandmother to

my two-year-old daughter, and my students who inspire me with their dedication."

Priyanka's journey was not all smooth sailing, and while she faced discrimination because she was a woman, another difficulty was the financial strain caused by the pandemic. Here, Priyanka's family became a solid support for her, and it was this that enabled her to keep going. Priyanka today provides hope for so many young people in India, she urges them to pursue their passions, break gender stereotypes and preserve their rich cultural heritage.

Priyanka's journey is a testament to the power of transformative leadership. Her ability to blend tradition with innovation, to challenge gender stereotypes, and to inspire and empower young artists has made a lasting impact in preserving and evolving the rich cultural heritage of Yakshagana. Over the years, she has worked with more than a thousand artists to restore the lost glory of traditional and folk forms in India.

हम हैं जिज्ञासु
I am Inquisitive

RESHMA ARYA

KAMAULI, UTTARAKHAND

“सालों से बनी मानसिकता
को बदलना हमेशा एक
चुनौती रही है।”

*“Changing the mindset conditioned over years
has been a challenge.”*







Gently, music can shake the world.

Labelled unlucky because her five-year old brother passed away when she was born, Reshma was also body shamed as a child for her weight and the colour of her skin. In the low-income household where she grew up with three sisters and a brother, Reshma says “I struggled to understand things like gender issues, menstruation, safe and unsafe touch.”

Music, which was close to her heart, provided some relief. She sang and sometimes even composed songs. A loan provided by her father’s supportive employer helped her train as a midwife. Reshma began working as a nurse in hospitals, helping deliver babies. It was clear to her that the

Previous page: Reshma Arya engrossed in her daily singing practice at the headquarters of the Manzil Mystics in Delhi.

This page: Reshma Arya jams with the all-female band of the Webhor initiative at the headquarters of Manzil Mystics in Delhi.

Page on right: Women at the Kotla slums in Delhi listen with rapt attention as Reshma Arya conducts a session on menstruation as a part of a Webhor initiative.

Next page: Reshma Arya takes a break from her session at the Kotla slum.





medical system was not treating women right. “Women are not made comfortable in hospitals,” she says, and it was painfully evident to her that women lacked information about sex, pregnancies and abortions.

Reshma decided to bring her two skills together and she began to compose songs about social issues at Manzil Mystics, an NGO based in Delhi. “Through Manzil Mystics, I was able to get a scholarship to study in the United States for a year. At the end of that period, my family advised me to stay on in the US, but I was determined to return.” Reshma put together her knowledge of nursing, music, storytelling and education to set up WeBhor, under the Manzil Mystics umbrella.

Together with Manzil Mystics, WeBhor conducts music sessions in government schools and with oppressed communities to allow a safe, inclusive, and empowering space for adolescent girls and women on the subject of reproductive health and hygiene. Young girls are encouraged to shed their inhibitions, to speak about their experiences, and discuss their difficulties. Lessons are full of fun and laughter, and animation videos.

The programme covers women’s rights, financial and legal literacy, social and emotional well-being, and sexual harassment. “Once, an older woman told me she would never miss our weekly sessions because not only did she learn but she would also share the knowledge with her granddaughters as her son did not allow them to attend.”

It wasn’t only an individual but some schools also were reluctant to allow WeBhor sessions to take place but Reshma persisted. According to her, “My strength came from the girls and boys I interacted with in schools, and the support of my mentor, Ravi Gulati of Manzil Mystics.” Reshma loves being part of her all-woman band; the musicians from low-income backgrounds entertain and educate people on gender equality for when it comes to matters of the (he)art, she leads by example. “When young girls learn to feel safe about who they are,” she says, “it’s immensely satisfying.”

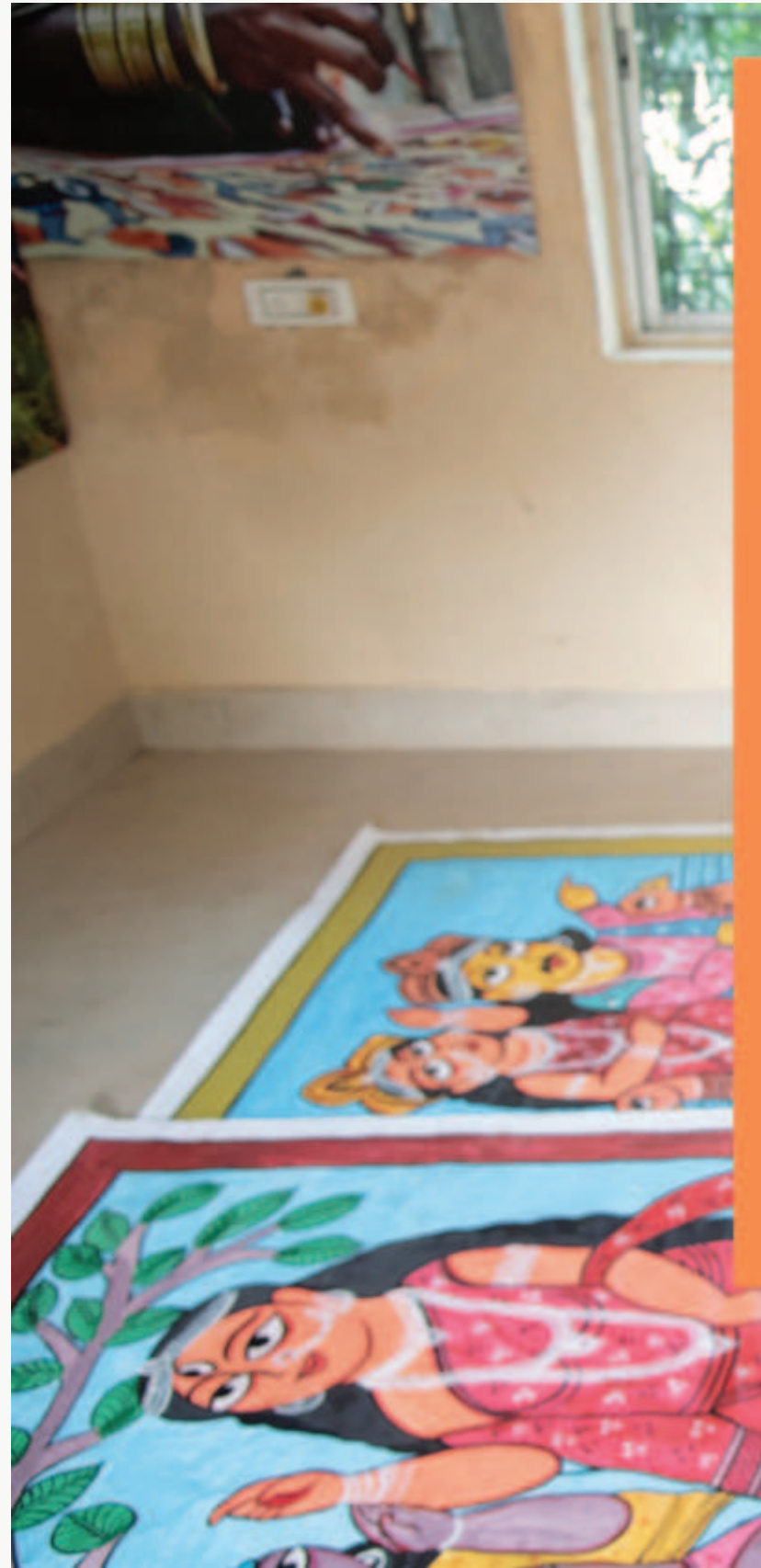
Reshma’s leadership is pivotal in her work at WeBhor. Her ability to educate, inspire, and lead by example has been instrumental in empowering young girls and women, fostering a sense of safety and confidence in their identities. Her innovative use of music as a tool for social change embodies the essence of creative and impactful leadership.

हम हैं कल्पना
I am Imagination

SWARNA CHITRAKAR

*NAYA VILLAGE,
WEST BENGAL*

“My art is my wealth.”







“My husband might not be a traditional Patachitra artist, but he is my biggest support,” says Swarna Chitrakar. As a young girl, Swarna learnt the art of Patachitra (scroll painting), and Patua (storytelling) from her father in Naya village in Paschim Mednipur district in West Bengal. This gave her the strength to confront all the other daily discriminations she faced—not being allowed to study, forcibly kept at home, having her voice silenced.

Marriage, which came at age 14, changed little. Her husband’s family ill-treated her; misery, hunger and poverty dogged her life at all times.

Previous page: Swarna Chitrakar displays her paintings on issues related to women’s empowerment.

This page: Swarna Chitrakar, holding her traditional scroll painting, one of her most valuable creations, in her workshop in Pingla, West Bengal.

Page on right: Coconut shells are used to mix natural colors by the Patuas. Swarna Chitrakar uses natural traditional colors mostly prepared from the extracts of various plants, fruits, trees and seeds, and mixes them with natural gum, collected in a coconut shell, and dried in the sun.

Next page: Swarna Chitrakar holds a painting depicting Goddess Durga slaying a demon—a popular story from Indian mythology.





In despair, and perhaps to survive, Swarna turned to her beloved art, Patachitra, traditionally forbidden to women and girls. She started to paint, using the natural colors her father had taught her to make.

Patachitra paintings come alive when they are accompanied by songs and storytelling. Swarna began to immerse herself in this. The family's opposition slowly disappeared as earnings flowed in from her work and their economic condition improved. Soon, social issues found their way into her work and she began to sing songs of freedom, to tell stories of child marriage, inequality, women's empowerment, biodiversity and other issues of concern.

Swarna's fame grew. She became an inspiration for other girls and women in her village, including her five daughters, who were now able to dream of financial independence. For Swarna, an important turning point came in 1994 when she was awarded a prestigious state award. This official recognition led to growth—her work received critical acclaim in India, Europe, and the United States. The Rural Craft and Cultural Hub project of the Department of

MSME&T and UNESCO helped to further amplify her work. As a result, Swarna's small village has now become a hub for cultural tourism and art enthusiasts which, in turn, has meant economic progress.

Reflecting on her journey and taking her place as an artist in galleries in the UK, the US, France, Italy, Germany and Sweden, Swarna speaks of how these experiences have enriched her and sums it all up in one short phrase: "My art is my wealth."

Swarna Chitrakar's message is clear and empowering: pursue your calling and challenge gender biases. Her legacy is not just in the beautiful scrolls she creates but in the paths she has opened for women in her community and beyond to embrace their artistic talents and contribute to social transformation. Her life story, embodied in her art, continues to inspire many to envision and work towards a freer, more equitable tomorrow.

হুম হুঁ চিত্রকর

I am a Painter

TAJKIRA BEGUM

BIRBHUM, WEST BENGAL

“If I work hard, I can
spend the earnings on
my own terms.”







In the heart of Birbhum, West Bengal, Tajkira Begum carries forward the legacy of Kantha, a traditional craft passed down through generations of women in her family. Her journey from a struggling mother to the founder of the Tajkira Kantha Silai Centre is a testament to resilience, innovation, and transformational leadership.

Born into a lineage of Kantha artisans, Tajkira found herself at crossroads when her family faced severe financial difficulties. The traditional art of Kantha, once a means of repurposing torn fabric into beautiful quilts and beddings, brought her new hope.

In 2006, driven by the dual goals of financial independence and the revival of this fading art, Tajkira established

Previous page: Tajkira Begum in the middle of sewing a Kantha, a light duvet used in West Bengal especially during the summer months.

This page: Women at the Tajkira Kantha Silai Centre hold up their designs in their various stages.

Page on right: Tajkira Begum takes a moment from her craft to help a member of her Silai centre and hold up a finished quilt.

Next page: Tajkira Begum surrounded by her Silai centre members in a moment of solidarity.





a center to breathe new life into Kantha, transforming it into wearable art like sarees, dupattas, and suits. Despite facing societal pushback and logistical challenges, Tajkira's unwavering commitment led her to traverse villages on foot, securing and distributing stitching orders among local women. The initial profits were humble, but her vision was grand.

Tajkira's leadership model is characterized by empowerment and sustainability. By establishing Self-Help Groups and collaborating with the Rural Craft and Cultural Hub project, she not only preserved a cultural heritage but also created a thriving community of over 350 artisans across 20 villages.

Tajkira's efforts have redefined the economic landscape for women in her community, enabling them to contribute to their households, access education for their children, and gain financial autonomy. Her daughter's pursuit of an English Honours degree and the shift in social norms towards education over early marriage are direct outcomes of her leadership.

The transformation in societal attitudes—from scepticism to respect and admiration—mirrors the profound impact

of Tajkira's endeavours. Her leadership model, grounded in empowerment, sustainability, and community solidarity, has garnered recognition from the highest echelons of the state and beyond.

“It was difficult as villagers would taunt my husband about my work,” Tajkira reflects on her early challenges, underscoring her resilience. “If I work hard I can spend the earnings on my own terms,” she asserts, embodying the ethos of self-reliance and empowerment.

Tajkira's leadership journey is a testament to the power of transformational leadership in redefining traditional roles and crafts for modern empowerment. Her vision for the future is encapsulated in her profound message: “Today I am, someday I won't be alive. But I want all women of my village to learn, do good, and have confidence in themselves. They should not have to struggle as I did.”

Through her actions and words, Tajkira Begum has not only elevated the craft of Kantha but has also woven a new narrative of empowerment and leadership for the women of her village and beyond.

हम हैं सोनाली स्वप्न

I am Golden Dreams





Anuradha Mathur inspires and motivates women to achieve more than they thought possible through an emphasis on education, mind-shifts, and systemic change.

“The burden of balance cannot be solely for women to carry,” says Anuradha Mathur, referring to the common societal expectation where women are often the ones primarily tasked with juggling multiple roles and responsibilities, such as those related to work, family, care, and household management. “It is unfair and unsustainable.”

As a child, Anuradha thought all women were like her bureaucrat mother: they drove cars, rode horses, confronted dacoits in rural areas, and

Previous page: Anuradha Mathur, founder of all women’s management and leadership initiative, at the campus of The Vedica Scholars Programme for Women in Delhi.

This page: Anuradha Mathur steps out on the lawn of the campus of the Vedica Scholars.

Page on right: Alum Deepika Sodhi back on campus, teaching the intricacies of project management to students at the Vedica Scholars Programme for Women in Delhi.

Next page: Anuradha Mathur captured in the middle of a working day.





worked themselves into the ground. She had no idea of the constant negotiation, trade-offs, and discrimination women confronted on a daily basis.

Reality was a shock. And learning grew from that.

At 35, Anuradha was one among the 25 women selected worldwide for the Global Women's Mentoring Partnership Programme. She spent a month shadowing a Fortune 500 woman Chief Executive Officer. She saw how different the world was for women, how blatant and widespread the inequalities they faced. And most importantly, she realised how privileged she had been. "I was gutted. My privilege was in my face and I wanted to pay it forward."

Anuradha set up the Vedica Scholars Programme for Women, a first-of-its-kind all-women management and leadership programme dedicated to building a cadre of competent young women who can pursue break-free careers and become financially independent. Over an 18-month period women learn economics, management, and leadership skills with a focus on critical competencies curated for women to succeed in the workplace. The women scholars of the programme say that the course "has changed the way we speak to our fathers."

In its tenth year today, Vedica Scholars has turned out more than 500 self-confident young women, many of whom have taken the values of empathetic and sensitive leadership with them into their workplaces, the first step towards making change. As Anuradha works on building knowledge and management skills, her message to young women is clear: "Don't quit, no matter what. Don't be dependent, dependence often comes with a loss of dignity."

And she has a message for the government too: "Rather than seeing women merely as beneficiaries, enable them to contribute to the nation. Acknowledge them as assets and not victims."

Anuradha has dismantled barriers not just for herself, but also paved the way for others, transforming the narrative from survival to strength, from beneficiary to assets.

Her work transcends individual achievement and focuses on altering societal structures and perceptions, emphasizing the role of women as active contributors and leaders in society.

I am an Optimism-guerilla

JASMIN GUPTA

AHMEDABAD, GUJARAT

“Women in leadership positions must pull up other women.”







“Women in leadership positions must help empower other women,” says Jasmin Gupta, a digital banking expert. Jasmin has a vision for the women she works with: “financially free, financially fit, and financially fearless.” She’s made it her life’s ambition to work towards this. “I want nothing less than to reshape the financial landscape for women in India,” she adds.

With a career spanning over twenty years, Jasmin has worked with HDFC and Kotak Mahindra Bank. She played a key role at Equitas Small Finance Bank by launching the fastest growing neo-bank NiyoX and credit-backed neo-bank FreoSave. In 2022, she was appointed the CEO and co-founder of Lxme, where she led the team towards creating India’s first neo-bank for women. None of these banks have a physical location—although Jasmin

Previous page: Jasmin Gupta, the National President of the Financial Inclusion Council during a work day.

This page: Jasmin Gupta enjoys a moment surrounded by her plants at home.

Page on right: Jasmin Gupta with her parents. Jasmin demonstrates how to create a Niyo money account.

Next page: Jasmin Gupta looks through her notes during a regular day in her office.





believes that physical banks are also important—and to use them, the women need to be digitally literate.

As Chief Digital Officer of Pahal Finance and Founder of MeitMoney, she is championing the cause of digital finance for women. She strongly believes that “to educate a woman is to educate a family, similarly to finance a woman is to finance a family.”

Jasmin feels that women “have been historically neglected in financial product design and I’m determined to change this.” So, she makes sure that there’s a match between the banking needs of a particular set of people and the banks they access. Her products are designed to address not only the financial but also the emotional needs of consumers. She says, “a woman who I helped in managing her finances, found her voice in the family. Now, everyone looks to her for financial advice and values her inputs.”

In the next five years, Jasmin wants to financially empower 50 million women. “Women must support women, else how will we survive?” she says. To reach her goal, she combines the physical and digital approaches into something called the ‘phygital’ approach, one that “is good to reach rural India, but to do this we have to have much better digital access.” As the National President at the Financial Inclusion Council, Jasmin Gupta is well-poised to achieve her dream. “It is very important for women to be financially independent,” she

says. “That is the only way you will be able to live life on your own terms.”

And she learnt this invaluable life lesson from her parents, who staunchly supported her dreams and aspirations.

“They stood with me through thick and thin,” she says. “It’s a huge support in a country like India where daughters are still killed at infancy and considered a burden,” she says.

Jasmin’s story as a digital banking expert and her dedication to empowering women financially, demonstrate her ability to foresee and enact changes that have a lasting impact on the industry.

She focuses not only on providing financial services but also on empowering women to be confident and informed financial decision-makers. This involves addressing both the practical and emotional aspects of financial management. Her work envisions a future in which empowerment is the norm, where women are not only financially independent but also empowered to make informed decisions and take control of their financial well-being. Her story is an inspiring example of how visionary and empowerment leadership can drive significant societal changes, particularly in the realm of financial inclusion and independence for women.

हम हैं जूही
I am Jasmine





KANIKA TEKRIWAL

BHOPAL, MADHYA PRADESH

“I realized no one was going to do anything for you. You had to be your own biggest supporter.”



Bhopal-based Kanika Tekriwal was only seven when she started teaching herself everything there was to know about helicopters by devouring encyclopaedias. Aircrafts fascinated her. She dreamt of traversing the skies and becoming a pilot. Convinced that India had immense scope for an aviation market, she wanted to bring her entrepreneurial spirit to the Indian aviation industry and transform it. Her degree in business management provided the perfect starting point for this.

Previous page: Kanika Tekriwal deboards the Legacy 600 private jet at Begumpet Airport in Hyderabad.

This page: Kanika Tekriwal on a sofa crafted from components of a Turboprop airplane.

Page on right: (Top left) Captain Ankur Singh prepares for takeoff in the Legacy 600 private jet operated by the JetSetGo company at Begumpet Airport, Hyderabad. (Top right) Kanika Tekriwal, in front of a Legacy 600 private jet at Begumpet Airport in Hyderabad.

(Bottom) Kanika Tekriwal briefs a JetSetGo employee about the flight schedule at their office in Hyderabad.

Next page: Kanika Tekriwal in the Legacy 600 private jet at Begumpet Airport in Hyderabad.





But all of these were just dreams. Kanika's plans met with stiff opposition from all quarters. She was told time and again that her path should lead to marriage and not an entrepreneurial career.

At 21, Kanika was diagnosed with cancer. Determined not to fall into despair at this, Kanika turned her life around and decided the expectations of others no longer mattered and she would do what she wanted. She began her own business in the aviation sector.

As a first step, she created an app. She was sorely disappointed when this was dismissed as a video game by her family. More disappointments followed. Whenever she tried something new, investors and customers in boardrooms scoffed at her and told her to 'open a cupcake shop'. When she interacted with her colleagues, they refused to take her seriously and junior colleagues were reluctant to report to her. During aircraft inspections at airports, the crew, and the pilots, would be dismissive. These experiences left her shattered. But she wasn't one to give up easily and she persisted. At the young age of 24, her vision saw the light of day and materialized with the founding of JetSetGo, an online marketplace for private jets and helicopters. "I realized no

one was going to do anything for you. You had to be your own biggest supporter."

Under Kanika's leadership, JetSetGo became India's first and largest private jet marketplace; her company's fleet grew to include ten private jets, catering to the needs of individuals and corporations and even offering air ambulance services.

She is now working towards building an air taxi system. "My biggest challenge," she says, "is preparing for the unknown in the industry. Each day, the unpredictable nature of the weather and workforce management keep me on my toes. But this uncertainty is also what fuels my drive!"

Kanika Tekriwal's story is a shining example of pioneering leadership in a challenging and dynamic field. Her journey from a young girl dreaming of helicopters to a successful entrepreneur in the aviation sector demonstrates the power of perseverance, self-belief, and the courage to challenge the status quo. Her leadership has not only transformed her life but also set a new standard in the aviation industry, inspiring many others to reach for the skies.

हम हैं गगन
I am the Sky





PINKY JAIN

JAIPUR, RAJASTHAN

“When a young girl sees her mother thriving emotionally and financially, she is empowered.”



In 2020, Pinky Jain co-founded Mysa, an impact organization, set up to help women stand on their feet. An IIT alum, with a background in garments, Pinky decided to make a fresh start after the pandemic. She chose the name Mysa, a reference to the Marwari word, mai sa, which means ‘like a mother’ and stands for nurturing and enabling women. As Pinky says, “When a young girl sees her mother thriving emotionally and financially, she is empowered.”

Pinky set out to empower women by offering them economic and emotional tools to change. She began the process of building a community of rural women entrepreneurs, training a

Previous page: Pinky Jain interacts with women working at Mysa workshop in Ramsar Palawala, Rajasthan.

This page: Two women members of Mysa chat while holding up their creations—toys made from fabric.

Page on right: (Top left) Teena, a young member of Mysa, works on a design, which she explains to other members. (Top right) Teena and Mamta work at the Mysa workshop at Ramsar Palawala, Rajasthan. (Bottom) Shushila, Preeti, and Neelam from Ramsar Palawala work at the Mysa Workshop.

Next page: Pinky Jain surrounded by other members of Mysa.





hundred women in math, colour mapping, design thinking, and skill training in different crafts in order to make them industry ready. “I’d seen how women in villages around Jaipur were so trapped by their repressive environments and felt so helpless to change things.” Once the community was in place, a production unit was set up, and women were trained to handle every process, from inventory to shipment.

Nothing was allowed to go to waste. Pinky collected waste fabric from textile factories in and around Jaipur, and the women turned these into quilts and toys. They then turned to the next step, marketing, and made videos of what they’d made, uploaded them online to gain traction. Today, many of them are trainers.

The women’s efforts to reach out are supported by Pinky who is in personal touch with potential buyers. “I speak to them about Mysa’s vision and I ask them to support the women. Today, we have 70 women in the village who have a regular source of income and many earn as much as the male members of their family.”

As with many such initiatives for women, Mysa’s work has not remained limited to making and selling products, but the community of women has come together to help each other, taking up cases of domestic violence, child marriage and caste discrimination. There’s even a library for girls, and run by girls, that was set up recently.

None of this has been easy. Pinky recalls that in the early days, the women’s families were not happy at the idea of their women going out and working. But over time, once the women started earning and supplementing the family income, things changed, and it’s not unusual to have family members helping women with household chores.

Pinky explains, “The family is a collective. Every member needs to understand this...we carry the burden of deep conditioning. Until we drop this burden of guilt and become accepting of each other’s dreams and choices, why expect it from our families or anyone else?”

Pinky’s leadership style is characterized by Social Entrepreneurship and Empowering Leadership. She has successfully combined her business acumen with a deep commitment to social change, particularly in empowering women. Her approach emphasizes skill development, economic independence, and community support, leading to transformative changes not just in individual lives but also within the broader community. Pinky’s work with Mysa is a testament to the power of leadership that is grounded in empathy, sustainability, and a vision for a more equitable society.

हम हैं संगठन
I am a Collective





RUMA DEVI

BARMER, RAJASTHAN

“Women need to support women. I want to let all the women of this nation know that we are all talented women. Look for your special talent and let it lead you to the top. There’s room for all of us”



Ruma Devi, head designer of Gramin Vikas Evam Chetna Sansthan (GVCS) and the founder of The Ruma Devi Foundation comprising 30,000 women across 250 villages in Rajasthan, is a tribal artisan, the wife of a farmer and a Grade 8 dropout. “My day starts early in the morning,” she says, “I wake up, milk the goat, make tea, sweep and swab my home, cook for the family, and leave for work.”

By ‘work’ Ruma means the offices of the Foundation that has so far created 30,000 rural women entrepreneurs. The story began for Ruma with marriage and childbirth: married at 17, she lost her baby because she did not have money for treatment. Determined never to be financially dependent again, Ruma decided to start a business.

This page: Ruma Devi training women artisans in Rawatsar.

Page on right: (Top) Women artisans at work at the Gramin Vikas Evam Chetna Sansthan, Barmer, Rajasthan.

(Bottom) Showroom at the Gramin Vikas Evam Chetna Sansthan, where the artisans sell products manufactured across villages in Rajasthan directly to customers.





But the only skill she possessed—a legacy of her grandmother—was embroidery. She realized that she needed more than just needle and thread as her stock-in-trade and convinced ten women to join her to invest in a sewing machine. Then they managed to secure a trial order from GVCS and their journey began.

“None of the women in our group had ever travelled outside of their villages, and they spoke only Marwari, but they began to attend handicraft fairs across the state and beyond. They may not have had the language, but they had plenty of skill and enthusiasm.”

One thing led to another and in 2019, Ruma got the chance to design and model her own creations for a national show of Tribal Fashion. She drew the attention of leading designers who began to invite her to work with them. “I was delighted at this success but I also wanted to share it with my community.” Ruma began training women from neighbouring villages, encouraging them to be financially

independent, and to join hands with her. Once they did, Ruma connected them to buyers such as Ikea, Nalli sarees, Reliance Fashion and Fabindia through an eCommerce site, ensuring a live employment channel for the women. Orders also came in from overseas.

The Foundation has now gone beyond just commerce and it trains women in social media, marketing, and even helps with their children’s education. Ruma can justifiably be proud of her community of 30,000 women entrepreneurs. As Ruma says, “I want to let all the women of this nation know that we are all talented women. Look for your special talent and let it lead you to the top. There’s room for all of us.”

Ruma Devi’s story is a testament to the power of resilience, community, and the transformative impact of women’s empowerment at the grassroots level.

हम हैं उद्यमकर्ता
I am an Entrepreneur





THINLAS CHOROL

LEH, LADAKH

“If we are women who are confident and hardworking, no one can stop us.”



At a time when few Ladakhi women ventured into the world of being a trekking guide, Thinlas freelanced as one. Other women were curious about her path, and approached her, eager to learn about her unique profession. Many clients shared tales of their travels across India, often surprised that guides were typically male, highlighting the male-dominated tourism industry. Thinlas saw this as an opening to revolutionize the scene.

She imagined setting up a pioneering women's travel agency, a realm where Ladakhi women could thrive. The Ladakhi Women's Travel Company, set up in 2009 with some money from her father, was Thinlas's dream come true. She began to train other women to become skilled guides.

Thinlas knew she was stepping into uncharted terrain. Tourism is a key

This page: Thinlas Chorol's 'Ladakhi Women's Travel Company' is the region's only travel company owned and operated by women.

Page on right: Ladakhi Women's Travel Company excels in arranging homestay treks, exclusively led by female guides and porters, making them the only agency with an all-female team.





source of income in Ladakh, but it remains dominated by men. In Ladakh's ecosystem, anyone proficient in English and capable of engaging with tourists can become a guide, they don't need to have a formal certification. This makes it easy for young men to enter the profession.

It's more difficult for women, as Thinlas found in her early days. "Whenever I approached a travel agency to ask for work, I was rejected for no reason other than that I was a woman." Rather than discouraging her, this kind of discrimination fuelled her determination to make a place for women in the industry.

"Women face so many biases in the industry," she says, "there are all sorts of assumptions—that female guides will engage in alcoholism, or get into inappropriate relationships with

tourists whereas there is nothing like this. These stereotypes are just designed to hold women back."

At her agency, Thinlas has made it her priority to do away with such biases. She provides comprehensive training to women, teaching them basic English, tourist interaction skills, essential knowledge about flora and fauna, and trekking techniques. Thus far, around 80 women have trained under her. The transformation these women undergo is nothing short of remarkable. From not being confident and lacking even in communication skills, they are now confident, and knowledgeable women who are ready to take on the challenges of the tourism industry with grace and expertise.

I am Confidence





TURTUK WOMEN WELFARE SOCIETY

TURTUK VILLAGE, LADAKH

“I wanted a space
where women could
meet, learn, and earn.”



“We are no longer dependent on anyone for money,” says Abida Begum. “We earn our own, and there’s something special about one’s own hard-earned money.”

Abida Begum was sitting in her small shop in Leh, watching her landlady conducting the meeting of a welfare group she ran in the area. “Why can’t I do the same for women and girls in my village?” she thought. “Why can’t I create a space where they can meet, learn and earn?”

That question was only the beginning. It took Abida back to her village, Turtuk. There, she began talking to the women—the first step to turning her dream into reality. Among other things, she encouraged women— young, old, rich, poor, educated,

Previous page: Women of the Turtuk Women Welfare Society standing by the bridge in Turtuk village.

This page: Abida Begum, president of Turtuk Women Welfare Society.

Page on right: A few members of the Turtuk Women Welfare Society packing apricots to sell in the market.





illiterate—to grow diverse vegetables and market them directly to hotel chains. She directed them to large family events and encouraged them to offer catering services. She taught them to interact confidently with clients and to create support systems for each other.

Soon, her welfare group started to grow. Family concerns for their safety and security, cultural constraints about women working outside the house, slowly began to dissolve. Today, the group is 90-member strong—a thriving, confident bunch of women, whose sense of self-esteem and self-respect have only increased over the years. “Work with honesty and good intentions, and no one can stop you from prospering,” says Abida.

But right from the beginning, Abida was focussed not just on creating livelihood for women, but also create a safe space where they could bond with each other, where they could relax and share experiences in an informal setting. “I wanted a space,” Abida says “where women could work, learn, earn and talk.” And that is the space she created.

Abida’s story is that of leadership that cultivates empowerment, unity, and growth, not just in the pursuit of goals, but in the nurturing of every individual’s potential.

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We are Beacons of Light





ANOUSHKA SINHA

AGRA, UTTAR PRADESH

“We want to break patriarchy, erase stereotypes, and change archaic legal systems.”



Anoushka turned personal challenges into a broader mission to empower and uplift others. Her leadership is about creating change and advocating for those who are less privileged, demonstrating the power of resilience, vision, and persistent advocacy.

“Empower the older generation; inspire the younger generation,” says Anoushka Sinha. “Intergenerational collaboration and learning exchanges are the way forward. The responsibility for both is now ours.”

When she was 10 years old, Anoushka brought home a child to tutor. At 20, she is a United Nations youth leader, a UNEP regional ambassador, a gender equality fellow at UN Foundation and

Previous page: Anoushka Sinha, 20, poses for a photograph outside her home in Agra.

Page on right: A fun moment with students of the non-profit organisation Ek Pahel in Agra. Anoushka conducted an interactive workshop on the 17 sustainable development goals, where students wrote letters to world leaders as part of the ‘My letter, my voice’ campaign. These letters were read by Anoushka at the Global Goals week in September 2023 in New York to help them get their voices heard at a global platform. Some were even exchanged with Tennis Champion and philanthropist, Roger Federer.





an advisor to the World Bank's youth advisory group. She is committed to transforming the lives of underprivileged children through education, because as she says, "Education is a basic right, and yet such a luxury for so many."

In her own life, Anoushka had to fight for this basic right. At 18, when she lost her father, her family gave her an ultimatum: marry and buy peace, study and be disinherited. She chose the latter.

When she became India's youngest radio jockey to speak about issues such as menstruation and girls' education, her family came down heavily on her. They mocked, called her names and told her that spreading awareness was not child's play and she was wasting her time, that no good would come out of what she was doing. Anoushka was undeterred.

She set up Roshan Bharat (A Brighter India), to educate and mentor underprivileged children, especially girls. She continued to host shows on local community radio channels, where she taught, talked, dreamt, and created stories and worlds for children. She began to support girls interested in STEM through her initiative Girlytical and helped them get access to industry leaders and free mentorship to become successful in the male-dominated STEM fields. She

continued to fill their world with curiosity, questions, hope and dreams.

And slowly the numbers grew: one child turned into a thousand, the thousand doubled and tripled, and today she has reached over 1,00,000, and counting. She mentors children not only in India but globally and she now leads all of these initiatives under the Anupam Foundation named after her late father. She also led Happiness Drives, which offers young people access to resources—books, films, food, tutoring, and counselling to help with their education.

Anoushka expanded her work by partnering with NGOs and became part of a global movement that advocated for the legal rights of young people. "We want to break patriarchy, erase stereotypes, and change archaic legal systems," says Anoushka.

Disinherited from her own family, Anoushka now champions the collective right of her generation to inherit a legal system that supports youth rights. Anoushka's active efforts to change legal and social systems for the betterment of youth are exemplary. She has successfully transformed adversity into opportunity, not just for herself but for all those whose voices need amplifying.

I am a Crusader





FREE/DEM FELLOWS

*BADARPUR,
NEW DELHI*

“अक्सर लड़कियों को मोबाइल फोन तक नहीं मिलता क्योंकि माता-पिता की राय होती है कि यह उपकरण उनको बिगाड़ देगा।”

“Often girls don’t even get access to cell phones for parents think this device will corrupt them.”



Chanchal's ability to inspire and motivate others through her actions and vision, her focus on community-level issues, and her efforts to bring about change from the ground up, especially in areas like media and communication for social change, defines her journey.

The 19-year-old Freedom and Democracy fellow from Tejpur Pahari, is not just another member of the collective; she's a force driving change. As a Freedom and Democracy fellow, she contributes to Free/Dem—an initiative that empowers the marginalized voices of women and migrants through the transformative power of media.

Previous page: Khushi, Payal, Komal, Savita, and Chanchal (from left to right) are members of the collective known as Free/Dem fellows. Their mission is to amplify the voices of their community by producing podcasts they conceptualize and create.

This page: Komal has been associated with Free/Dem fellows for the past five years. Her most recent podcast focused on empowering women to achieve financial independence through home-based work.

Page on right: Girls watch a documentary on gender equality and collectively record a podcast at the Delhi-based center in Tajpur Pahari. A labrador puppy named Tuffy joins the Free/Dem fellows session during the break at the Delhi-based center in Tajpur Pahari.





Free/Dem is not just a platform; it's a movement that redefines the narrative of those living on the urban margins of Delhi. It is where silenced voices find expression and where stories of struggle, resilience, and hope are brought to the forefront.

Chanchal's work with the Azad Lab podcast, a significant part of the Free/Dem Community Podcasts, is a clear manifestation of this mission. Azad Lab stands among six shows produced as part of the Free/Dem Community Podcasts. These podcasts, the digital embodiment of the Free/Dem WhatsApp Radio, are a collective effort by women and girls like Chanchal.

They delve into themes of gender equity, love, freedom of expression, human rights, and justice, discussing and sharing lived realities that often go unheard. An initiative of Ideosync Media Combine, the Free/Dem fellows leverage the power of communication for social change. Fellows are trained in photography and community radio.

But Chanchal's challenges were many, including basic access. "Often girls don't get access to cell phones for parents

think this device will corrupt them," she says. In her episode 'Haryanvi Boli, Jaise Mithi Boli,' Chanchal brings to life the diverse experiences and perspectives of the people in Tajpur Pahari, capturing the essence of their cultural and linguistic identity. This work is a crucial part of Ideosync's Free/Dem initiative, which aims to provide a voice to marginalized communities using audio and video, thereby amplifying their narratives and stories.

Chanchal's story embodies the importance of harnessing the power of narratives to break barriers, connect communities, and inspire collective action for change. Her journey with the Free/Dem Fellows is marked by her determination to use media as a tool for empowerment. Her work transcends mere participation; it's a testament to her leadership and vision. As her family listens to her podcasts, their apprehension transforms into admiration, mirroring the wider change she inspires in her community. The transformative impact of her work, not just in terms of social issues but also in altering perceptions within her community, showcases a leadership that is both empowering and inclusive.

We are Disruptors

MADHUMITA NATH

AGARTALA, TRIPURA

“Education is the key to women’s empowerment. But learning skills alongside is also important so that young women are able to earn.”







Music was all around Madhumita in her uncle's home where she grew up, and she loved it. But later, as adolescence and adulthood set in, she was told that young girls must sing in a lower pitch, keep a distance from boys, and not act on stage. "I refused to accept any of this, I was determined to take up acting, so I defied all these restrictions."

The defiance took interesting forms. In college, Madhumita insisted on riding a motorbike, incurring her mother's wrath. Later, she married someone outside of her caste, and was disowned by her family. Criticism for being 'different' followed her at home and in the workplace. A staunch believer in the importance of education, Madhumita now turned to teaching. She included poetry, art, theatre in her teaching methods, and lobbied hard for girls to wear more comfortable clothes at school.

Previous page: Madhumita Nath, poses for a portrait at her residence in Agartala.

This page: Madhumita Nath, shares a moment with her dog, Biscuit, at her residence in Agartala.

*Page on right: Books by Madhumita, named *NeemPari (Neem Fairy)* and *Roop Nogor Somvad* that address societal issues, women's rights, and the value of domestic labour. The embroidery work on the saree is done by Madhumita.*





“The persistence paid off and the Tripura government introduced salwar kameez as the official uniform for girls in 2008.” Over time, she became a guiding light for girls, championing their rights and safety. For this, and her other work, she had to face considerable harassment. But this did not deter her. “Education,” according to her, “is the key to women’s empowerment. But learning skills alongside is also important so that young women are able to earn.”

Madhumita used her own skills and knowledge to write articles and books. One of her books, *Roop Nagar Somvad* paints a picture of a realm where every young woman is liberated from oppression and lives free and empowered. Despite familial resistance, she also continued to be involved with the performing arts, and worked with institutions such as the National School of Drama.

The cherry on the cake, however, was the cracking of the Tripura Service Commission exam post-motherhood. After this, she made history as the first female presiding officer in a Tripura assembly election. Madhumita is vocal and passionate about women’s capabilities and she categorically rejects the prevalent belief that women are not capable of hard work. “I’ve observed that women are often hesitant to take on big responsibilities in the professional space. This is ironic because the same women shoulder huge responsibilities in the domestic space. Women do not need to be afraid of doing something new. They are competent, and capable.”

Madhumita’s leadership style, marked by courage, resilience, and a relentless pursuit of equality, sets a powerful example for women everywhere.

হুম হুঁ সৌদামিনী
I am Lightning





SANDHYA GUPTA

*PALAMPUR, HIMACHAL
PRADESH*

“I’ve often been one of the very few women wherever I’ve gone. It didn’t discourage me; instead, I saw it as an opportunity.”



Sandhya Gupta, a determined educator and social entrepreneur from Bihar, was the first woman in her town to ride a bicycle, and to become an engineer. Later, Sandhya went to the US to study and earned a doctorate. But deep down she knew she wanted to come back to India if she was to make a meaningful impact in women's lives.

To ready herself for this, she did a Master's in Public Affairs from the Humphrey Institute in Minneapolis. Once back, she immersed herself in supporting organizations dedicated to girls' education.

As a first step, Sandhya enrolled her daughter in a local government school and began volunteering there herself. It wasn't long before she noticed that

Previous page: Sandhya Gupta giving a tour of the new Aavishkaar Center campus at Palampur, Himachal Pradesh.

Page on right: Sandhya at the Aavishkaar Center campus. Sandhya conducting a Ganit Charcha session. Sandhya assisting a student during her Ganit Charcha session. Sandhya assisting a student during her Ganit Charcha session.

Next page: Sandhya along with her team members and co-founder of Aavishkaar, Sarit Sharma (front row, right).





there were many more girls in the school than boys. Soon, the reason behind this became apparent: parents preferred to send their sons to private schools, not hesitating to spend on them, while the girls were not given the same opportunity.

Apart from gender discrimination, Sandhya also noticed the students' reluctance and anxiety in dealing with maths and the sciences. Somehow, they did not feel confident addressing these subjects. She then decided to focus on these two issues and went on to set up Aavishkaar, an organization dedicated to revolutionizing STEM education by cultivating exceptional educators. Aaviskhaar has today trained hundreds of women to become skilled math educators. This creates a pathway for them to enter STEM fields while also addressing math anxiety among students.

Even as she worked to build up a community, Sandhya found herself as the lone woman in various academic and professional settings, and sometimes, for this reason, she hesitated to put her views forward. But soon, she realized that her unique voice needed to get through to people and this gave her renewed confidence. As she says, "I've often

been one of the very few women wherever I've gone. It didn't discourage me; instead, I saw it as an opportunity. So I'd say, dream and pursue your dreams. Nothing can stop you if you believe in yourself."

Over the years, Aavishkaar's work has impacted the lives of large numbers of students. Sandhya describes how rewarding this is: "When a participant – be it a student, teacher, or team member – understands something and their eyes light up with confidence, it gives me joy. When a teacher tells me they've understood a concept for the first time, I'm filled with gratitude."

Sandhya's leadership style is characterized by visionary and transformative approaches. She has successfully combined her passion for STEM with her commitment to gender equality in education, making significant strides in empowering women and girls. Sandhya's journey and work with Aavishkaar stand as a testament to the power of dedicated leadership in creating lasting, positive change in society.

I am a **Problem-solver**

VISHALI KOLA

*SRIKALAHASTI,
ANDHRA PRADESH*

“The best way to be right is to prove your detractors wrong.”







“Pain can break you. But if you fight and survive it, pain can help you heal, to bring in change, for yourself and for others.”

This was what it was like for Vishali Kola, a housewife from a conservative Andhra town called Srikalahasti. Vishali grew up in Bengaluru, raised by an abusive and controlling grandparent. As an adult, in her in-laws’ family, despite having a supportive husband, she was severely body-shamed for her weight and skin colour, and her life remained restricted. Even to dress in something different from the traditional garb

Previous page: Vishali set up Tejobharat, a non-profit organization with the aim of educating young children on body safety.

This page: Kalamkari is an ancient style of hand painting textiles using natural dyes that is native to Srikalahasti.

Page on right: Tejobharat employs a fun interactive app to teach children the concept of good touch and bad touch and how to respond in case of any violation. Through her brand, Vkola, Vishali has taken Kalamkari onto products that appeal to an export market, helping boost the economy of this art. The traditional motifs in Kalamkari are birds, flowers and characters from Hindu mythology.

Next page: Vishali works with several groups of artisans in Srikalahasti to customise her designs and reimagines discarded bits of fabric into new products.





invited harsh criticism. As she says, “India isn’t an easy place for women, especially small-town India. Every woman around me has her struggles. We all eventually learn coping mechanisms to overcome and survive.”

Vishali chose to stay within her acutely restrictive joint family and began the slow and painful journey of bringing change, not only for herself but for others in similar circumstances.

For years every night, she would wait till the family were asleep, and then start the work of designing weaves and patterns, which she would then share with local kalamkari artists who would make them for neighbouring stores. Through this, the artisans earned an income and so did she. She founded a fusion fashion brand called Vkola which has, over the years, found buyers in many countries.

Her success hasn’t changed much about the restrictive environment in which she lives, but Vishali has worked hard to transform that too, if not for herself, for her children. “I was determined they would not imbibe the patriarchal values I have grown up with.” Today, her sons are her biggest support. In 2010, Vishali launched a nonprofit initiative

called Tejo Bharat, or ‘Bright India’. Tejo uses a free app to teach children about body safety without sexualising the issue and encourages children to speak up if they sense a threat. “The tragedy about child sex abuse is that children are too young to know what is right or wrong, particularly when it occurs within families. An abused child loses their sense of worth for life,” says Vishali, reliving the pain of her personal experience. With a child being abused in India every 8 minutes, the issue is both rampant and urgent. As Vishali says, “A ship surrounded by water sinks only when it is broken. Don’t let your environment break you. Don’t let the water get in, stay stable and strong. And prioritise yourself, the best way to be right is to prove your detractors wrong.”

Vishali Kola’s journey from a restricted housewife to a successful entrepreneur and a child rights advocate is an inspiring tale of courage, determination, and the power of self-belief. Her work in fashion and child protection serves as a beacon of hope and a model of resilience, inspiring women to challenge societal norms and prioritize their well-being and aspirations.

I am Focused

GAYATRI SWAHAR

GURUGRAM, HARYANA

“We need to stop being judgemental of each other’s individual choices. Everyone deserves liberty.”







Gayatri Swahar makes no apologies for who she is and what she does. An industrial sociologist, Gayatri works with thousands of farmers, many of them women. The story began with the launch of her enterprise Y-Cook, a start-up selling healthy snacks. Gayatri partnered with local farmers, supplying them saplings, and buying back harvested produce.

An initial cohort of 13 agripreneurs was thus created and soon, as her business expanded (she now exports to 12 countries), so did their numbers. Then came the pandemic, forcing everything to a halt.

Previous page: Dr. Gayatri Swahar surrounded by corn crop at the Dhandupalaya Kernel Podding Unit in Karnataka.

This page: A woman worker concentrates on peeling corn at Dhandupalaya kernel podding unit in Karnataka.

Page on right: Dr. Gayatri Swahar chats with Mr. Ramesh, one of the first farmers that Y-Cook collaborated with at its inception, at his nursery. Corn getting processed at the Y-Cook factory in Kolathur, Karnataka. Dr. Gayatri Swahar with a corn sapling in the nursery.

Next page: Dr. Gayatri Swahar catches up with women employees of the Dhandupalaya Kernel Podding Unit at Dhandupalaya village, Karnataka.





Gayatri began thinking of how to deal with setbacks like the pandemic. Perhaps scaling up the value she could bring to the community could be an answer. The offer of an Indian Administrative Fellowship by the Karnataka government presented an opportunity. She was tasked with bringing the agility of the start-up culture into the government agriculture sector. The number of farmers she now worked with went up exponentially. She also began to mentor CEOs of Farmer Produce Organisations (FPOs) on marketing skills and global agricultural practices.

Among the numbers of farmers were many women. All of them worked the farms but few had any decision-making power. “The patriarchy is astoundingly high in agriculture. A village woman is conditioned to feel that it’s wrong to be paid more than a man, even if she’s earned it or is leading an FPO,” Gayatri says.

Gayatri worked hard to change this mindset. She mentored women CEOs on how to stay their ground in a male-dominated society. Her reward was a women-led FPO Collective, which had women farmers travelling from place to place on motorbikes and working in tough unfriendly environments. “Given half a chance, women can do so much,” she says. Gayatri created a successful business model but also integrated local farmers into this model, benefiting both the business and the community.

Her efforts to uplift and mentor women in the agricultural sector, particularly those in leadership roles in FPOs, her focus on changing the mindset around gender roles in agriculture, and empowering women to take on decision-making roles is indicative of a leader who is committed to fostering equality and empowerment. Her story is a powerful example of how leadership can drive not just business success but also social and cultural transformation.

I am a Reformist

EZHIL SUBBIAN

BENGALURU, KARNATAKA

“The world needs innovative solutions and for that, we need a lot more women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM).”







“A leader believes in making big bets,” says Ezhil. She would know, because she’s made many such in her life. The first bet: A PhD, in molecular Biology and Biochemistry from a top university. The second bet: Building and scaling up technologies in early-stage start-ups across California. The next bet: Returning to India to pioneer greenhouse fermentation. And her most important bet: Ensuring that India meets its net zero targets.

A pioneering deep tech engineer, Ezhil set up StringBio in 2013, with an aim to convert big ideas into reality. “We use an innovative gas fermentation platform to convert greenhouse gases like methane into products like proteins, peptides and polymers, all with low carbon, land and environment footprints,” she says.

StringBio was initially set up in the Bay Area, USA, but was moved to Bengaluru as Ezhil believed that

Previous page: Ezhil Subbian in front of the StringBio office, Bengaluru.

Page on right: Ezhil Subbian checks some documents before signing at the StringBio factory in Bengaluru. Later at her desk, Ezhil Subbian catches up on her work.

Next page: StringBio employees update Ezhil Subbian during a work day.





India needed innovative solutions to reduce the impact of greenhouse gases and minimise its carbon footprint. She was also eager to explore if such deep tech work could be housed in India and rolled out into the global market. StringBio was only the third operation of its kind in the world, with competitors in Europe and the USA.

While offsetting carbon by converting methane into products was mentally very stimulating, there were quite a few hurdles along the way. Getting peers to buy into the feasibility of converting methane into a recyclable was the first challenge. Would the infrastructure in India be robust enough to support the operation? She worked hard at educating the ecosystem, creating awareness about the issue in the Indian community and presented her solution, which helped her raise capital for setting up the human resources and machinery required.

None of this, Ezhil points out, would have been possible “without my co-founders and the strong interdisciplinary team at StringBio. This is a fundamental aspect of the field we are trying to change.”

Bringing the product to market needed a cross-disciplinary scaling up across industries like the FMCG sector, oil and gas, the agri sector, and the food industry, while being rooted in synthetic biology. Ezhil was confident the solutions were there if people looked hard enough. As she says, “The world needs innovative solutions and for that we need a lot more women in STEM.”

And she’s doing her bit to fulfil this; 30 per cent of her start-up workforce is made up of women, something that is highly unusual for a start-up at the intersection of deep-tech and manufacturing. Ezhil’s work has proved that deep-tech synthetic bio can be developed and scaled up in India and that we can compete head-to-head with Europe and the USA while attracting foreign investment. “India can transition swiftly to a low-carbon economy if people focus on their visions and don’t give up until they convert them into reality,” she says.

Ezhil’s journey of building and scaling up technologies in early-stage start-ups and pioneering greenhouse fermentation technology, her ability to take significant risks, such as moving her operation from the Bay Area to Bengaluru, demonstrates her forward-thinking approach. Her focus on converting big ideas into reality, particularly in reducing greenhouse gas impacts and minimizing carbon footprints, is all about making bold bets on the future, relentlessly pursuing visionary solutions, and paving the way for transformative change in the world.

She is an entrepreneur who is not afraid to take risks and a visionary who is committed to making a significant impact on the environment and society. Her story is an inspiring example of how leadership can drive innovation, challenge the status quo, and contribute to global change, especially in fields like synthetic biology and environmental sustainability.

I am a Tech-blazer

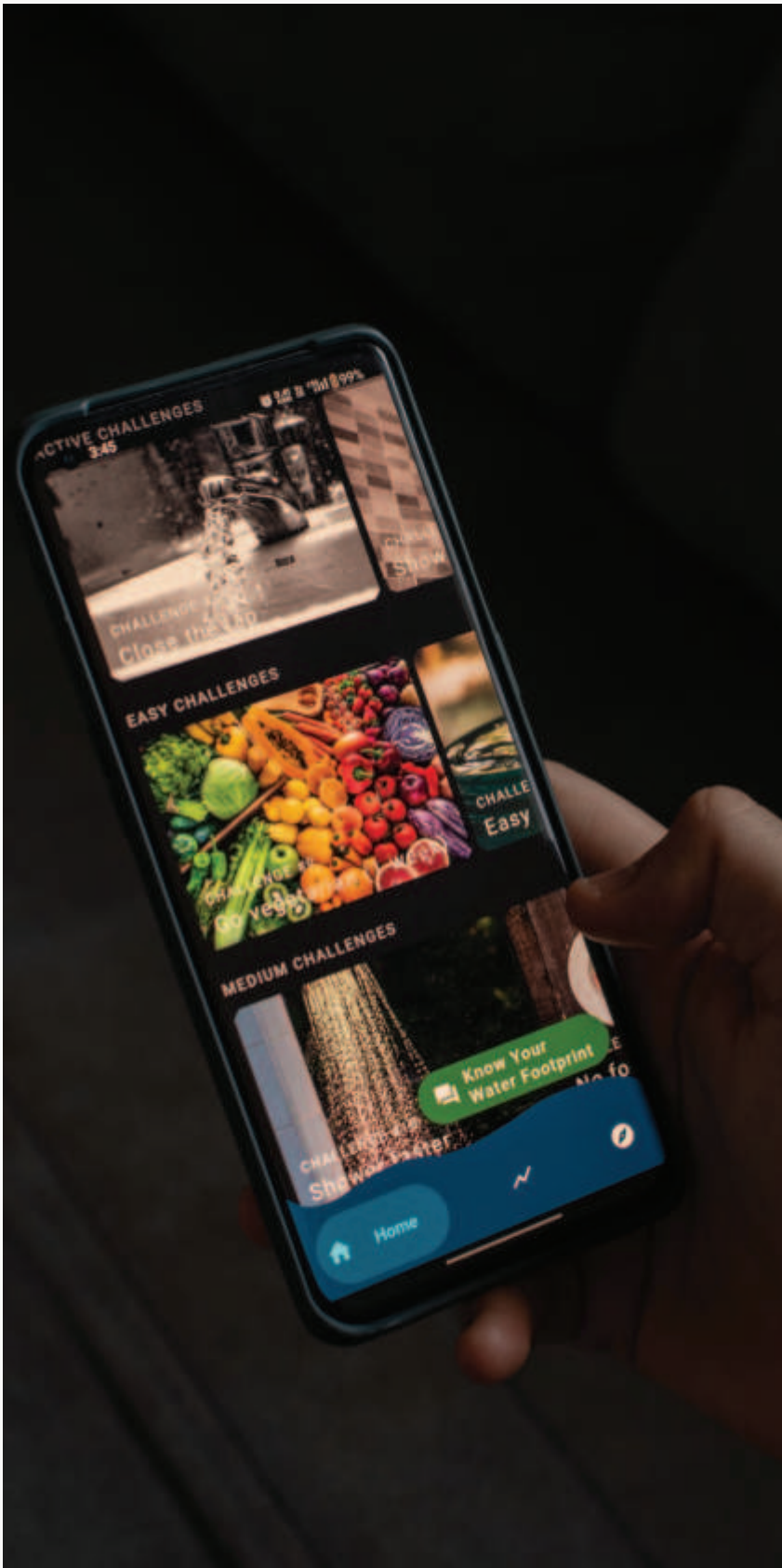




GARVITA GULHATI

BENGALURU, KARNATAKA

“Persistence is very underrated. Stay persistent.”



The world wastes 14 million litres of water every day, just in the water that is left behind in glasses at restaurants. When her teacher in school, KN Purnima, spoke of this in class, 15-year-old Garvita was shocked. She decided to make it her mission to educate people, especially those who have easy access to water, on the importance of mindful usage.

But she hadn't bargained on people's resistance to change. "Most people disregarded what I said because of my age. The only person who stood by me

Previous page: Garvita Gulhati is the founder of 'Why Waste?' a youth-led organization that aims to change people's mindsets towards water.

This page: The 'Why Waste' app was made to create an awareness of an individual's daily water consumption and to drive change through tweaks in our everyday habits.

Page on right: Change can be brought about in small ways like using the same water that is used to wash the vegetables at home to water the plants.

Next page: Sustainable Stories is a children's book published on Story Weaver (Pratham Books' online platform) in which the youngest character in the book is the key driver of change and conservation. This free online book encourages young kids to be the change and lead problem-solving.





A PUBLICATION BY WHY?

THE SUSTAINABILITY STORIES

STORIES OF CHANGE
TO INSPIRE OUR PEOPLE
TO BECOME
WATER-CONSCIOUS CITIZENS.
FOR STUDENTS BY STUDENTS



was my teacher KN Purnima who told me I must be resilient and keep going.”

And so, she did. In 2015, Garvita introduced an initiative called ‘Why Waste?’ Her team partnered with large numbers of restaurants, and eventually in 2019 cracked a collaboration with the 500,000-member strong National Restaurant Association of India. Why Waste?’s enthusiastic volunteers worked to educate people about mindful water use. “At first, people were confused about what we were trying to do. But then, we brought in a concept called “glass half full” at restaurants. Instead of serving glasses of water filled to the brim, our partners began to serve customers only half a glass of water to prevent wastage. It also served as an inspiration in many ways to take and use just as much water as you need and not waste.”

The group also created the WhyWaste app, designed to educate people about their water footprint and guide them in adopting water-conscious lifestyles. “The app encourages

people to value water and avoid wasteful habits, especially when water is readily available. Living a bit consciously, you can save a lot of water.” The app has now also been adopted by UNICEF in their WASH programs to drive and track actionable awareness.

The Why Waste? team went on to put together a storybook filled with tales of water conservation initiatives and solutions driven by the youngest characters of the story. This collection of stories of change and conservation aims to encourage young kids to be the change and lead problem-solving. National Geographic is supporting the team in their endeavours to scale access to these stories.

“I love nothing more than receiving pictures of half-full glasses at restaurant tables and hearing from people about the steps they have taken to adopt simple changes that can make us all into mindful water consumers.”

I am a Powerhouse

KALPANA RAMESH

HYDERABAD, TELANGANA

“The obstacles for me have not been the government or the slum dweller, but the educated citizen, who seems to prioritise concrete assets over life-sustaining resources like water.”







When Kalpana Ramesh, an architect and interior designer, built herself a home in Hyderabad, she knew well the truth of the old adage: every drop of water counts. Kalpana created a self-sufficient water management system to harvest rainwater. “My water management system,” Kalpana says, “is based on a fundamental law of nature. Give back what you take. Replenish what you use, because it’s your lifeline.”

Before long, the entire neighbourhood of 100 households asked to collaborate in the rainwater harvesting system, and the residential area where Kalpana lived became the city’s first fully

Previous page: Kalpana seen in discussion with the district collector Jitesh Patil, regarding the restoration of the stepwell at Bhiknoor.

This page: Entrance to an abandoned stepwell at Lingampet that is currently being restored.

Page on right: Naganah Kunta is a six-level stepwell in Banslalipet from between the 16th and 17th century that was restored as an initiative to reclaim the traditional knowledge of water systems and foster water sustainability. The Banslalipet stepwell project has helped revive micro economies in this area by making it a tourist landmark. A stepwell at Lingampet that is currently in the process of restoration.

Next page: Kalpana Ramesh outside Naganah Kunta.





sustainable water autonomous area. Kalpana's individual solution became a community's solution.

In 2016, during the acute water shortage in the city, Kalpana's neighbourhood was able to share water with others who needed it. As she says, "We tend to design our homes according to our personal needs, without a thought about the community or the available resources. What's the point of living in mansions if there's no water in the taps?"

Encouraged by the response to her system, in 2020 Kalpana set up The Rain Water Project, to create a long-term change in the relationship city dwellers had with their most basic resource: water. While her neighbours had been appreciative of her efforts, Kalpana found that the civic planning sector wasn't entirely hospitable to women. "I learnt not to compete with men. A man has his strengths and I have mine. The smart thing to do is to work together."

There was appreciation elsewhere though. On Women's Day in 2020, Kalpana was one of the 7 women leaders handpicked from across the country to take over the Prime Minister's social media accounts and broadcast her water conservation message to the nation. This paved the way for her next step. She went on to do a survey of the city's water bodies which revealed several dried-up lakes and a series of old, abandoned stepwells. She began restoring these, working with urban planners, architects, geologists, aquifer experts,

conservation architects and heritage construction workers.

After dredging and cleaning, a set of natural rainwater reservoirs were created that fed the water table beneath and replenished the water the city was draining out. The 300-year-old Bansilalpet stepwell is one such remarkable example of a decrepit garbage pit transformed into a lush heritage attraction, which brings the city 22 lakh tons of water every year.

Today, the Jal Shakti Ministry has recognized Kalpana's efforts as a 'water hero'. There are other plans on the horizon: 13 stepwells have been restored already, 20 more are scheduled. Kalpana target is the restoration of all 600 stepwells in Telangana. "The obstacles for me have not been the government or the slum dweller, but the educated citizen, who seems to prioritise concrete assets over life-sustaining resources like water. In summer, our borewells are drying. In the rains, our cities are flooding. All it needs is efficient management to even out this imbalance."

Kalpana's leadership model is a blend of visionary thinking, collaborative effort, and an unwavering commitment to sustainable resource management. Her work highlights the critical role of innovative thinking and community engagement in addressing environmental challenges and achieving long-term change.

I am a Water Warrior

NIDHI PANT

*AURANGABAD,
MAHARASHTRA*

“The only way to sustainably combat the climate crisis is to listen to the community that is most impacted and tailor solutions to their needs.”







Nidhi Pant took on the task of bringing about ground level change in the lives of farmers, especially women, by focusing on education. Through consistent work to empower women in rural areas, and to instill a sense of self respect in them, Nidhi's reward was when she saw women evolve from self-denying individuals, who put their own needs on the back burner, into empowered breadwinners who are not afraid to assert their right to nutrition. "This was a crucial change in mindset," says Nidhi, "from preserving food for others to recognizing their own worth."

Nidhi's inspiration to enter the world of education came from the iconic Indian educator and reformer, Savitribai Phule. Savitribai's dedication, not only in providing education, but also ensuring that women had a sense of self-worth and self-respect was inspirational for Nidhi. She recalls, "I worked with a

Previous page: Nidhi Pant outside her lab.

This page: A worker using a solar dryer.

Page on right: Quality and moisture checking in the lab. A worker demonstrating usage of solar dryer. S4S technology's female workers sorting dry food in the factory.

Next page: Nidhi Pant during a field research session with women micro-entrepreneurs.





mother who had just become financially stable. This enabled her to fulfil her daughter's dream of an education. This is how important the financial stability was."

In the early days, Nidhi's 'solutions' were focused on technology. But experience taught her otherwise. While technology was necessary, it wasn't the only answer as people's lives were complex. "Initially, our focus was more on solving problems through technology, primarily related to climate change and food wastage. However, I realized the multifaceted nature of the issues – energy access, gender disparity, and more. Working on the ground showed me the complex reality."

This realization led her to move away from a pure technological path and she began to listen to the people she was working with. "Nothing was more important than listening to the community and tailoring whatever solutions

we could find to their needs." A first step here was to build trust, something that is not easy and requires time and patience. "Trust takes time to build, especially since they've encountered failed solutions before. Designing solutions tailored to women's needs, including affordable credit access, has also been crucial."

The secret of Nidhi's success is her openness to learning and her ability to adapt and evolve. With this, and the support of her collaborators, Nidhi is well set on the path of her goal: "to reach a million farmers and empower thousands of micro-entrepreneurs."

Her ultimate goal? To inspire Indian women to believe in their potential to catalyze change, embodying the true spirit of empowerment and self-respect.

I am Persistent





PRABHA YADAV

MUMBAI, MAHARASHTRA

“Every patient in need, irrespective of their financial condition or geographical location, should be able to access reconstructive surgery.”



In Marathi, her native language, Prabha Yadav, a renowned plastic surgeon, describes herself as 'tript' or satisfied. And indeed, she has reason to be. Her journey to become the celebrated plastic and reconstructive surgeon she is today, began early. As a medical student, she was fascinated by surgical procedures. While working with a well-known Italian surgeon, she was introduced to a technique in plastic surgery where a patient's own tissue can be used for reconstruction, particularly in cancer cases.

This learning became pivotal for Prabha. She'd seen how cancer patients had to live with disfigured faces and bodies, and how that destroyed their self-confidence. "I understood that it wasn't only the patients' functions that we needed to restore, but also their appearance, the aesthetics. We could do this through reconstruction surgeries so that they could live normal

Previous page: Dr Prabha Yadav and her team checking on a patient.

This page: Dr Prabha Yadav removing a stitch.

Page on right: Dr Prabha Yadav and her team discussing surgical procedure with a patient.





lives,” she says. Twenty five years ago, fewer than 200 free-flap reconstructive surgeries were done in a year; and today more than 200 are done every day in India.

But for Prabha, personal success was not the point. She wanted to expand the ambit of her work so it could benefit more people. “My goal is to educate and train more people so every deserving cancer patient can receive treatment. I want to establish a virtual lab to more effectively train students and ensure quality care for patients. I believe that every patient in need, irrespective of their financial condition or geographical location, should be able to access reconstructive surgery.”

Her family played a pivotal role in her success. “I had a lot of support from my family, especially my sisters. And my husband has been incredible in helping me balance work and life.”

And when she looks back at the work, she has behind her – and the years that are yet ahead of her – she feels a sense of calm and satisfaction. She feels confident that her students will carry forward the work she begun. “It’s been a fulfilling Journey to help patients regain their confidence and find social acceptance. My patients and my students have always been a source of strength for me.”

हम हैं तृप्त
I am Satisfied





SANGEETA SAKSENA

BENGALURU, KARNATAKA

“Any change that comes overnight is unlikely to sustain. Lasting change comes over time. It is born within, not forced from outside. That’s the change we are aiming for.”



In 2002, Sangeeta Saksena and Shaibya Saldhana, both medical doctors, created Enfold Proactive Health Trust as a response to what they saw as social apathy towards teen pregnancies, gender-based violence and child sexual abuse. As gynecologists who worked with children and adolescents who had been subjected to sexual abuse, they were deeply concerned about the long-term impact of emotional trauma on the abuse survivors, made worse by the unavailability of age-appropriate information and non-judgmental support. In their words, “The beliefs we inculcate in our children must be empowering, not

Previous page: Dr. Sangeeta in front of the Enfold office at Bengaluru.

This page: Contents inside the sexual assault medical management and forensic examination guide developed by Enfold.

Page on right: Dr. Sangeeta explains the working of the teaching tools at the Enfold office in Bengaluru. These handmade models are some of the tools developed by Enfold to teach students. The sexual assault medical management and forensic examination guide, and the Suvidha kit are used to provide sexuality and personal safety education to children with visual/auditory and sensory impairments.

Next page: Dr. Sangeeta Saksena at the office looking through facilitation guides that Enfold developed.





ones that disempower them. Nonsense like girls are ‘impure’ during their periods or widows are ‘inauspicious’ should be challenged.”

Enfold began a social discourse on sexuality and its ramifications from all angles—educational, advocational, legal and rehabilitational, across all strata of society. Their mission was to promote children’s right to safety and dignity by ensuring they had easy access to sexuality and personal safety education. As Sangeeta says, “At Enfold, we teach children to respect their bodies, every part of the body, equally from head to toe, including the anus and genitals. Each part has a critical function that keeps us alive, so why should one part be ‘dirty’ and one revered? Same for another’s body.”

A comprehensive child educational programme that addressed gender equity, sexuality and personal safety was created based on existing cultural and belief systems. This included inputs from paediatricians, mental health specialists, law enforcement and legal professionals, educationists, policymakers, writers, and psychologists. “I tell children that if someone makes fun of their bodies, tell them, God made me like this. If you have a problem, take it up with God, I had nothing to do with it.”

Laddering up from grades 1 to 10, the programme offers information and builds critical values like self-esteem, body image and personal safety, inclusivity, gender equity, gender diversity, trust, and so on. In addition to the in-school module, Enfold also publishes illustrated workbooks with how-to manuals. The content is brought to life via videos and interactive personal safety apps, the Surakshith, the Bal Suraksha and the Stri Suraksha apps.

“Experts from USA helped us introduce restorative practices that build relationships and heal damaged ones, and in doing so, build communities based on communication and trust,” says Sangeeta. “Practices like class circles, restorative circles become safe spaces for children to talk and share feelings and experiences without judgement.”

A lot is shared, from pain, joy, dreams to apologies. Restorative practices teach children how to meet their needs without trampling over another’s rights, making them better-adjusted adults, and responsible members of society. “Training hundreds of school and college teachers, and social workers is an important part of what we do,” says Sangeeta.

Enfold’s 30 members and 15 facilitators have succeeded in reaching out to over 2,27,414 children across 938 schools, 72,744 parents and teachers, 10,971 police, doctors and legal professionals, 1,688 government officials and 9,726 social workers in over 60 cities and rural areas across India. Child safety requires a synergetic and sustained effort. As Sangeeta says, “Any change that comes overnight is unlikely to sustain. Lasting change comes over time. It is born within, not forced from outside. That’s the change we are aiming for.”

Sangeeta’s leadership in child safety and advocacy is marked by compassion, dedication, and a deep understanding of the societal and emotional complexities surrounding child welfare. Her work exemplifies the belief that real, lasting change is a gradual process, nurtured from within rather than imposed from outside. Under her guidance, Enfold has become a beacon of hope and change, contributing significantly to the creation of safer and more understanding communities for children across India.

I am a Harbinger





NUPUR LALVANI

MUMBAI, MAHARASHTRA

“Finding my independence in thought and action helped me overcome obstacles of uncertainty and fear.”



Nupur was only eight when she was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. Today, she is a passionate advocate for global health and an unwavering champion for individuals living with the disease. She encourages people, especially women, to pay attention to diabetes, which is expected to impact over 98 million people in India in the next decade. She says, "There's no shame in taking care of yourself; only when you do, you'll be able to look after others."

Nupur set up Blue Circle Diabetes Foundation, a registered NGO and patient support group for all types of diabetes. The NGO runs several projects such as Project Isha, which aims to relieve the financial burden of living with diabetes and fill gaps in diabetes education for economically

Previous page: Nupur Lalvani, founder of Blue Circle Diabetes Foundation at a fitness workshop.

This page: Nupur Lalvani leads a fitness workshop as part of her health advocacy.

Page on right: Blue Circle Diabetes Foundation members warming up before practising martial arts as part of a fitness workshop.

Next page: Nupur Lalvani helps a workshop participant with various exercises.





and socially disadvantaged people. Other projects under this umbrella include Project Gaia, which is aimed at women living with all types of diabetes in India, the Buddy Project Helpline, housed on the Blue Circle Diabetes mobile app and India's first psychosocial diabetes and mental health helpline, Blue Circle Workshops, online and offline diabetes related workshops and health awareness programs in schools, colleges, offices etc.

Led by Nupur, the volunteers share their own experiences and provide emotional support and personalized assistance to help people in managing diabetes. They run India's first psychosocial diabetes and mental health helpline, which reaches out to people across the country. They also do phone check-ins, especially for women, and address the medical, cultural and social aspects of the disease as well as the need for self-care. As Nupur says, "As women, we are conditioned to rely on and seek validation from people and processes other than ourselves. To be able to overcome that, we must learn to unlock our own potential."

Nupur has also collaborated with global health organizations such as the WHO and the International Diabetes Federation. Her organization has conducted more than 200 workshops with over 20,000 registrations. Clearly, there is a need for the kind of work Nupur and Project Isha are doing in bridging the gap in diabetes care, dispelling misinformation and advocating the needs of those living with diabetes in India.

In her spare time, Nupur likes to run in marathons, to spread awareness about diabetes. Today, Project Isha is an important part of the initiatives put in place to address this rampant disease. Nupur encourages diabetes patients to "be bold and fearless. If you're not sure you are capable, try anyway. You'll never know until you do."

Nupur exemplifies empowering leadership in advocacy for universal healthcare, particularly in non-communicable diseases such as diabetes. Her approach, blending personal experience with community support, has created a significant impact, providing a model for empathetic and effective health advocacy.

I am Solidarity





SASWATI DAS

NOIDA, UTTAR PRADESH

“No matter what the situation, one must be kind and humane.”



Even when she was a little girl, Saswati knew she wanted to be a scientist or an astronaut. Today, as a senior specialist in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Medical Sciences, a medical training and research centre in New Delhi, she is living her dream. She works at the intersection of molecular medicine, laboratory leadership, and artificial intelligence for health and space medicine.

An early experience made Saswati think of the importance of prenatal and neonatal screening. “I remember the time when, with a sinking heart, I watched a middle-aged man and his young son succumb to heart attacks. That was the moment I realised that research and access to it, were central to preventing cardiovascular risks. I began to advocate lifestyle changes for

Previous page: Saswati Das conducting research in the biochemistry research laboratory at the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Medical Sciences (ABVIMS) in Delhi.

This page: Dr. Das offers mentorship and guidance in the undergraduate biochemistry research laboratory at ABVIMS, Delhi.

Page on right: Dr. Das with her research team in the biochemistry research laboratory at ABVIMS, Delhi.

Next page: Dr. Das in a meeting with her medical staff at ABVIMS, Delhi.





people and hospital staff and to train the staff in research to improve the quality and effectiveness of patient care."

Today, as a leading healthcare strategist, MD, biochemist, professor, and researcher, Saswati wants to make learning both intellectual and practical. At the heart of her work are curiosity and inquisitiveness both of which, coupled with the search for knowledge, drive the collective good of society.

The journey is not an easy one. As Saswati points out, "You have to get support for undertaking research studies, you need to lead lab teams to build capacity to manage high workloads, then you need to deal with knowledge creation, dissemination and representation, and all of this needs to centre around teaching." She isn't one to shy away from a challenge though. In her words, "Treat every failure as an opportunity to reassess, reanalyse and rebuild."

An Artificial Intelligence enthusiast, Saswati has built a mobile application for respiratory rehabilitation of COVID-19 patients. She believes that programming skills

will become essential in healthcare in the near future. In the post-pandemic era, technology and health diplomacy can play a big role in strengthening healthcare systems. And she believes that young women can play a crucial role in this. "Women are often discouraged or themselves do not have the confidence to study mathematics or technological subjects such as programming. But I do believe they can excel in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math fields, too, and can bring a unique perspective to the continuous development of artificial intelligence," she says.

Saswati's ambitious goals and innovative work, especially in the integration of artificial intelligence and healthcare, her foresight in recognizing the importance of programming skills in healthcare, and her initiative in developing a mobile application for respiratory rehabilitation of COVID-19 patients exemplify this style, her commitment to make learning both intellectual and practical, is testimony to how much she values knowledge creation and dissemination.

हम हैं शाश्वत
I am Eternal





HELEN ISSAR

BENGALURU, KARNATAKA

“Families are structures shouldered by both parents. Parenting is about taking turns.”



One day, while in Norway, Helen Issar happened to notice a one-year-old eating dinner with no help from her parents, by mirroring what they were doing. She realized that a child who is less dependent on an adult for simple activities, not only reduces the load on caregivers but makes it much easier for mothers to go back to work, or fathers to stay home and look after their toddlers. The outcome often leads to happy and equitable co-parenting by the caregivers.

This experience inspired Helen to embark on an experiment in pedagogy that she calls Papagoya, which means parrot, the bird that mimics everything it hears, in Norwegian. Helen's Papagoya was based on a very successful Norwegian pedagogy that offers toddlers immersive and holistic

Previous page: Helen Issar setting out Norwegian play tools that are used to teach children at Papagoya, Bengaluru.

This page: Close up of Norwegian play tools at Papagoya, Bengaluru.

Page on right: Helen Issar leads an immersive and holistic training session at Papagoya, Bengaluru with children.

Next Page: Helen Issar in the play area at Papagoya, Bengaluru.





training and encourages them to be autonomous early in life. To this she added some elements of the age-old Gurukul system from India. “Together, this offers young working parents the option of focusing on their careers without guilt or worry. Like papagoyas, our students learn by watching and mimicking their environment.”

The desire to set up Papagoya, which gave new mothers the option to return to work and not let motherhood take over their identities, came from Helen’s own experience of motherhood. “We help dads in India support the mums,” she says, “by teaching them to be co-parents rather than just fathers.” Even as Papagoya gained popularity, it faced some pushback from grandparents who disapproved of the idea of a 7-hour kindergarten day for their toddler grandchildren. Also, learning through play wasn’t an easy concept for them to accept, especially as senior citizens who tend to grade kindergartens on the basis of children’s reading, writing and Math skills.

Hard work and persistence helped to change perceptions. Today, Papagoya has become a solid support system for double-income families and a space that encourages

inclusivity and diversity. Papagoya’s community comprises same-sex parents, single parents, grandparents and parents-to-be and all have access to a safe space where they can enjoy parenthood without the stress. As Helen says, “Fathers are more engaged, mothers are more fulfilled, and the children are joyful and independent.”

Today, Papagoya stands as a testament to Helen’s vision of a balanced parenting model. It’s a safe space where parents can embrace their roles without stress, where fathers are more engaged, mothers can pursue their careers guilt-free, and children flourish as independent, joyful individuals.

Helen’s leadership has not only established a successful educational model but also sparked a broader movement, challenging traditional parenting norms and advocating for a more inclusive, progressive approach to early childhood development and parenting. Papagoya, under Helen’s leadership, is more than an educational institution; it’s a transformative force reshaping the landscape of modern parenting and early childhood education.

I am a Pioneer





MEENU MANI

NEW DELHI

“Negativity is of no use. I wish people would not perceive those with disabilities as burdens.”



Born with cerebral palsy, Meenu Arora Mani was denied admission to school because of her condition. She refused to accept this treatment and persisted in seeking admission until a private school agreed to take her in, arranging for volunteers to assist her in attending classes. "I stepped out of my misery into the sun of positivity by meeting people and creating value."

Later, Meenu went on to complete her Bachelor's through correspondence. She then trained in computer skills, once again fighting people's scepticism about her ability to handle technology. Throughout, Meenu had to fight to remain positive. She says, "It was so

Previous page: 47-year-old Meenu Arora Mani is the founder of Yes We Can, an NGO dedicated to serving people with disabilities.

This page: Meenu frequently visits the Deer Park in Delhi as a way to unwind.

Page on right: Meenu boards the customized vehicle designed for disabled people at Green Park in Delhi. Meenu Arora Mani with the beneficiaries of the Yes We Can NGO at an event aimed at raising awareness about the right to information act for disabled individuals. Volunteer discusses about right to information act.

Next page: Meenu and her husband, Samuel Mani, actively engage in various initiatives of the Yes We Can NGO.





easy to wrap myself in a blanket of hopelessness, especially when people kept asking my parents why they were wasting their money on educating me.”

Meenu’s response to this was to set up her own NGO, Yes We Can (YWC) for people with disabilities. Today, Meenu is mobile, she travels in a motorized wheelchair, and through YWC she provides a platform for adults with disabilities to come together, do fun things, celebrate festivals, learn from each other, pick up new skills and interact with non-disabled people to show them how those with disabilities have similar needs and aspirations. As she says, “We might appear to be different, but we feel the same way you do.”

In the early ‘90s, public transport was a nightmare; Meenu dislocated her hip once on a bumpy auto ride. But she reached her place of work in time to avoid a pay cut. Meenu recalls the pain of being labelled ‘zero’ despite trying so hard. Today, she has transformed into an inspiring leader, encouraging women with disabilities through her leadership to start small businesses.

It was at an NGO Action for Ability Development and Inclusion meet that Meenu met her husband Sam. Since then they have worked together to encourage people with disabilities to lead independent lives. “So many people,” Meenu says, “fail to experience the joy of independence and make decisions related to their lives. We want to change that.”

On her list of things to do is also a home for people with special needs, a place free of judgement, filled with empathy, and one that focuses on inclusion and not discrimination. “Negativity is of no use. I wish people would not perceive those with disabilities as burdens.”

Meenu Arora Mani epitomizes transformative leadership. Her journey is not just about overcoming personal obstacles; it’s about changing perceptions, advocating for inclusivity, and empowering others with disabilities. Her leadership is marked by a deep empathy, a steadfast refusal to succumb to negativity, and an unwavering commitment to creating a society where disabilities are not seen as burdens but as aspects of diverse human experiences.

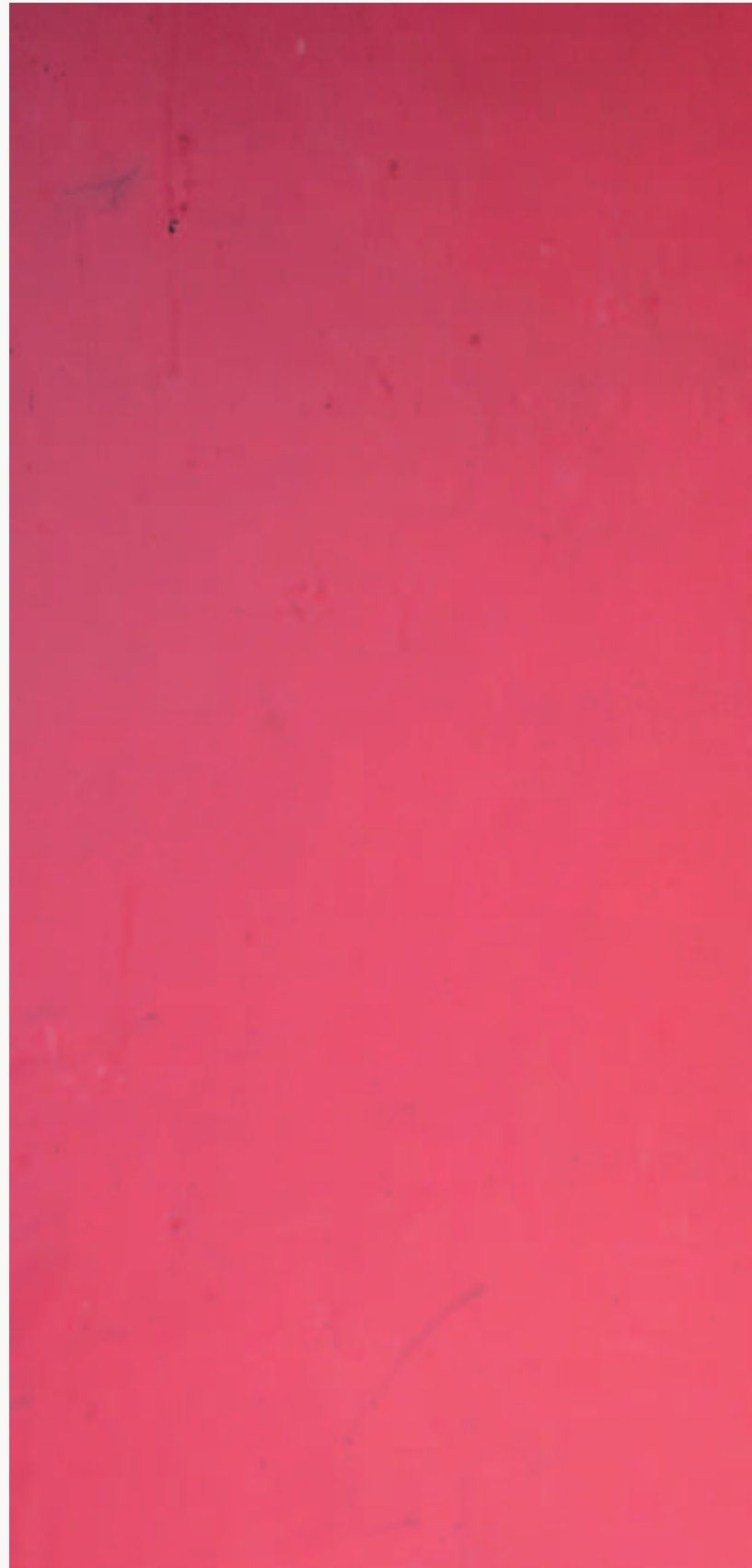
I am an Enabler

NIRMAL CHANDEL

*SOLAN,
HIMACHAL PRADESH*

“महिलाएं अपने पैरों पर खड़े
होने के लिए उतावली हैं।”

“Women are eager to stand on their own feet.”







Nirmal Chandel lost her husband at an early age. The question that faced her was: should she live the life of a widow like she was expected to, or should she find something to do? The decision wasn't easy and she battled despair and hope. "Many times," she says, "I thought of dying. I would look at the Sutlej river and contemplate ending my life."

Nirmal decided to choose her own path. She joined an NGO called SUTRA that works with women and those on the margins. She identified with so many women who were struggling with exclusion, were denied their rights and were not valued by society. She became a fierce advocate for them, determined to ensure they had both voice and power.

Previous page: Nirmal Chandel is the founder of Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan (ENSS).

This page: Nirmal Chandel conducting a monthly meeting of the Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan.

Page on right: Nirmal Chandel conducts a training session with the women of Solan district.

Next page: Nirmal Chandel captured in a moment of solidarity with women members of Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan in the Solan district.





Nirmal's curiosity and her willingness to learn stood her in good stead. She recalls, "I started purchasing compact booklets that provide straightforward Hindi-to-English word translations and began my learning journey. Initially, I faced many challenges, I had to struggle even to sign my name properly, and I made many mistakes, but in the end I learnt so much. In fact, it was in my early days at SUTRA that I was introduced to printing machines and computers! Once I learnt, I was able to pass on my learning to other women." Nirmal dedicated 15 years to the accounts department of the Solan district branch of the organization.

But it was her work with women that was closest to her heart. In 2005, inspired by a meeting in Rajasthan, Nirmal founded the Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan (ENSS, an organization for women who were alone) in Himachal, with SUTRA's support. "I had to work hard to convince families to let their women attend meetings," she says, "they were afraid that sending women out would be unsafe and would open them up to exploitation."

But soon, she had enough support to lead a 45 kilometre-march with over 3,500 rural women, some in their 70s and 80s. With more and more women approaching her for help, Nirmal decided to engage at the policy level and initiated discussions with policymakers and officials in the women

and development sector to advocate for assistance to women to become financially independent. She also promoted the idea of remarriage for widows.

The next steps took Nirmal deeper into the area she was involved in and she began to support women whose husbands had abandoned them, or those who chose to be single, as well as incarcerated women. Because of this, ENSS now collaborates with a broader group of women in the community.

Nirmal's work is appreciated, and successful but she still has to confront gossip and rumours about herself. She puts this down to people's conditioning: "Many times people would tell me that I should get married, or leave this work, that kind of conditioning is very hard to erase."

Nirmal's story is one of courage, transformation, and unwavering commitment to the rights and empowerment of single women. Her leadership has not only brought about tangible changes in the lives of many women but is a glaring example of how one can turn personal adversity into a powerful force for social change.

हम हैं स्वाधीन
I am Independent





PRATIMA JOSHI

PUNE, MAHARASHTRA

“You will make mistakes, and you need to be honest about them – it’s the only way you will learn and build community trust.”



"I wanted to pursue a career in the development sector and see how an architect could be relevant to those who don't even know of the existence of such a person."

Over thirty years ago, architect Pratima Joshi asked herself a key question. The profession of which she was a part was usually considered an elite one. "Architecture is generally seen as an elite profession. I wondered if there was a way in which architects could bring meaning to people who are struggling at the bottom of the pyramid." That was the start of an eventful journey.

Previous page: Pratima Joshi checks out new updates from Shelter Associates staff at Rajiv Gandhi Nagar slum.

This page: Pratima Joshi speaks to women during a visit to the Rajiv Gandhi Nagar slum.

Page on right: Interactive games help slum children understand their responsibilities towards a clean environment. Slum children demonstrate hand washing. Pratima Joshi introduces the use of menstrual cups to slum residents.

Next page: Pratima Joshi dreams of a world where every house, no matter how remote, will have a digital address.





Pratima began to work at making urban development inclusive and sensitive to the needs of marginalized communities. How, she asked, could architecture make a difference in the lives of those who were neglected by traditional designers? The first step was clearly knowledge, the need to understand the priorities of the communities of urban poor who formed a large percentage of urban populations.

A pivotal moment in Pratima's life was when she met individuals from the development sector who shared her commitment towards better housing for the poor. Together, they spoke of how to bridge the gap between architecture and community wellbeing.

An obvious answer presented itself in the power of data which could be leveraged to acquire deep knowledge and information about the community. It was thus that her organization pioneered the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to collect data for urban planning. But data alone wasn't enough, it was important, Pratima discovered, to involve local communities, elected representatives (even though this was not often easy) and to be totally transparent.

This would make for inclusivity and also help in addressing any potential obstacles. Today, when Pratima looks back, she acknowledges that every challenge she faced, and every mistake she made, contributed to her learning, and honesty in addressing these helped to build up trust with the community. Her passion for empowering young women and equipping them with the tools of confidence building is evident in everything she does. She dreams of a world where every house, no matter how remote, will have a digital address, and believes that comprehensive, data-driven approaches that address the complex needs of the urban population are the need of the day.

Her work exemplifies the impact of leadership that is both forward-thinking and grounded in community engagement. By integrating her architectural skills with a deep understanding of the community's needs, Pratima has not only made significant contributions to urban development but has also set an inspiring example for future generations of architects and urban planners. Her leadership has shown that with the right approach and commitment, professional expertise can be effectively harnessed to serve and uplift the broader community.

I am Inclusive





SHAKTI GROUP

KARNAL, HARYANA

“एक बार जब आप खुद पर भरोसा करते हो और आश्वस्त हो जाते हो, तो लोगों की मानसिकता भी बदल जाती है।”

“Once you start believing in yourself and your capabilities, people’s mindsets change as well.”



Once she was done with her 10th grade, Naina had nowhere to go. There were no schools in the village that offered classes beyond that level. If she, or any of the village girls, wanted to go on, she would have to travel a considerable distance and face all the risks that lay in wait on the way. No matter how much they wished to study, the girls were only too aware of the concerns of their families.

But the villagers had not reckoned with the girls' resourcefulness. The girls got together and formed a group, the Shakti group, a collective from Devipur village. The group's plan was

Previous page: Naina Devi at Barsara Government College, roughly 27 kilometres from her village.

This page: Naina Devi in the front yard of her house in Devipur village, Haryana.

Page on right: Members of the Shakti group taking a stroll to catch an auto rickshaw, which will transport them to the nearest bus stand in Barsat village, located 6 kilometers away. Members of the Shakti group take a selfie in Devipur village. Rakhi addresses members of Shakti group at the local community hall in Devipur village, Haryana.

Next page: Renuka, Rakhi, Preeti, Naina (left to right), members of the Shakti group, work together to assist girls in their villages in Haryana to pursue higher education.





to focus on the educational needs of women and children in their community and put in place a support system. They received help from a group called Breakthrough for this.

“When we began to come together to talk,” Naina says, “people in the neighbourhood would gossip about us. This wasn’t pleasant, we didn’t like listening to this kind of thing.” But the young women were not going to give in so easily. They got together and wrote a letter to the Chief Judicial Magistrate (CJM), asking for improved transport facilities to that they could access education.

And they succeeded. The CJM introduced bus services to Devipur. This opened the doors to education and opportunity, marking a turning point in the lives of the girls. Born in 2022, the Shakti group now has some 20 members, all of them above the age of 18. Naina and her peers work tirelessly to raise awareness about the importance of education. According to Naina, “I now have a sense of confidence in myself. Even people’s mentality has changed. Earlier, whenever a girl was character shamed, I could not understand what was wrong,

but now I question the mentality of the person doing the shaming.”

The group uses posters, videos, and stories of successful individuals who have achieved recognition through education. They also speak to parents about the role of education and about difficult subjects such as alcoholism. Naina proudly says “As a result of our awareness programme, many girls from the village have got admission into ITI courses, they study and are happy in their lives.”

Naina’s leadership in the Shakti group exemplifies the model of empowering education through collective action. Her journey is not just about overcoming personal obstacles but about creating pathways for other young women in her community to follow. Through persistence, solidarity, and innovative advocacy, Naina and her group have transformed the educational landscape of Devipur, inspiring a new generation to value and pursue education.

हम हैं प्रगति
I am Progress





MACHCHRAULI GIRLS

JHAJHAR, HARYANA

“किसी को कभी भी भेदभाव नहीं करना चाहिए। ऐसी धारणा नहीं रखनी चाहिए जो लड़कियों और लड़कों के बीच असमानता को बढ़ावा देती हो।”

“No one should discriminate or believe that boys and girls are not equal.”



Growing up in a village in rural Haryana, Pinky had always wanted to play football. She'd watched games on television, seen boys kick a ball around in the narrow lanes where she lived, and she longed to be a part of the game. Five years ago, she dared to speak out about her dream, and everything changed after that.

Pinky remembers that it was when a women's NGO, Breakthrough, came into her area and worked with the local schools on a gender equity curriculum called Taaron ki Toli, that things began to change. "Sunita ma'am from TKT used to visit our school regularly and she would talk to us about how boys and girls should be treated as equals, and there should be no discrimination. One day, I mustered the courage and told her about my dream, and things changed after that."

Sunita ma'am encouraged Pinky to play, she persuaded her parents to let their daughter follow her dream and

Previous page: Machchrauli girls during an evening football training session.

Page on right: Machchrauli girls warming up before a game.

Next page: Machchrauli girls on their way home after finishing their daily practice session.





she talked to Pinky's teachers, convincing them to encourage Pinky in pursuing her dream.

When Pinky began playing, she decided there was no point keeping her newfound knowledge to herself. So, she took it upon herself to educate her friends about football and soon, they formed a team. Over time, their numbers grew as more young women joined, and it became possible to create different teams—the Under 14, the Under 17 and Under 18s.

And the community of women footballers grew.

Now a first-year student at Vaish Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Pinky works hard to stay fit, she is also now a teacher so that takes up her time, as do practice sessions and trials for the National Senior team. In this, she's helped by her coach, Manisha who, Pinky says, "has a lot of confidence in me."

She has a dream: she wants to represent India in football and given her determination and grit, it will not be long before she achieves that goal.

Pinky's leadership style embodies inspirational and empowering Leadership. She has not only pursued her passion against the odds but has also inspired and empowered other girls in her village to follow their dreams. Her story is a beacon of hope for many young girls in rural areas, showing them that with determination and the right support, they can overcome stereotypes and achieve their goals. Pinky's ambition to represent India in football is a reflection of her unwavering commitment and the impact she has had in challenging gender norms and inspiring a new generation of female athletes.

हम हैं अडिग
I am Adamant





VISHALAKSHI

V

HYDERABAD, TELANGANA

“The belief that my work could positively impact the community kept me going, it’s what made me motivated and determined.”



“Empower yourselves, break barriers, and let your brilliance illuminate the path to a brighter future for all.” This is Vishalakshi’s advice to all women. It’s good, sound advice and comes from on-the-ground experience in her own life.

Strong, clear-headed, determined, adaptable and quick, Vishalakshi likens herself to the monitor lizard, known in Telugu as ‘uddam pattu’, a creature that adapts to different environments. She is an innovator and entrepreneur whose professional journey began with millet. Vishalakshi had seen how much millet, its products, its stories were entwined with the culture of her community, and how neglected it had become. She decided to take up millet farming on her family’s fields in order to revive the culture.

She worked with local farmers and communities to revive millet as a food, and to document its cultures. “I had learnt so much from my travels in rural and urban locations. Now I brought all this into my work.” Not

Previous page: Vishalakshi V, founder of Millet bank, with her farming community.

This page: Close up of a millet plant

Page on right: Farmers cultivating millets and a snapshot of Millet Bank’s products.

Next page: Vishalakshi V, founder of a millet bank and a millet museum.





content with farming, Vishalakshi took the unusual step of setting up a millet museum. Soon, this was followed by a millet bank.

Set up to create a sustainable value chain for millet products and crafts, the millet bank has already had an impact on the livelihoods of over 500 individuals through the partnerships with farmers, artisans and micro units. Drawing on local craftsmanship, Vishalakshi created gift baskets and other products, and the next item on her agenda is “to expand the reach of the bank and establish integrated infrastructure projects for millet farmers.” She wants to reach out to national and international markets.

Vishalakshi's family was supportive but she still faced plenty of challenges. Personal health problems dogged her, her sister lost her job during Covid-19, and Vishalakshi's own community was very critical of her. They had little faith in millet and were convinced it would not sell. But Vishalakshi kept at it. As she says: “The belief that my work could

positively impact the community kept me going, it's what made me motivated and determined.”

Today her work is appreciated and recognized by people like the Prime Minister, and the First Ladies of G20 nations. Vishalakshi says her success is “due to my family's support and my dedicated team.” She now aims to expand the Millet Bank's reach to more communities and regions, establishing integrated infrastructure projects for millet farmers and promoting their brand both nationally and internationally.

Vishalakshi's leadership style is a unique blend of innovative and community-centric leadership. She combines creative solutions with a deep understanding of her community's needs and cultural heritage. Her work in reviving millet farming and related crafts not only contributes to economic development but also to the preservation and promotion of cultural traditions. Vishalakshi stands as a testament to the power of innovative thinking, adaptability, and community engagement in creating sustainable change.

हम हैं
यौंदिक्कैळ्ळुबल
I am Adaptable





SYED SEHRISH

*BARAMULLA,
JAMMU AND KASHMIR*

“Women deserve respect,
not only for their potential to
achieve great things, but also
for who they are.”



“Women deserve respect, not only for their potential to achieve great things, but also for who they are,” says Dr Syed Sehrish Asgar, an Indian Administrative Services (IAS) officer. This conviction has sustained her throughout her life.

Dr Sehrish had trained as a medical doctor from Jammu University. But her dream was always to be an IAS officer and work with the government to bring about lasting change. Her conservative upbringing could have acted as a barrier, but she did not allow it to deter her from working doubly hard to realize her dream. “I come from a conservative background, and I feel that women should have the opportunity to compete and use their talents. I wanted to take on the most challenging exams to prove this,” she says.

She took the exam in 2010, and became the first woman in her state to top the Jammu and Kashmir Administrative

Previous page: Dr. Sehrish during a field visit.

This page: Dr. Sehrish attends a school science exhibition in Jammu & Kashmir.

Page on right: Dr. Sehrish visiting local artisans and a local vehicle workshop, followed by a team meeting.

Next page: Dr. Sehrish at her office.





Civil Services. Other accolades followed: in 2012, at the age of 25, she became the first woman Indian Police Services Officer from Jammu and Kashmir; in 2013 after clearing the UPSC (Union Public Services Commission) exam, she became the first Muslim woman from her state to be part of the Indian Administrative Services.

Dr Sehrish turned her attention to her region, particularly to Baramulla. She focussed on the health and agricultural sector, earning her the Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Public Administration. She spearheaded a project called Nai Soch (new thought), which installed incinerators and sanitary pad dispensers in all government middle- and higher-secondary schools of the district. The project also created 'pink societies' in each school for generating awareness on menstrual hygiene.

Every time, Dr. Sehrish faced opposition or was discouraged to follow her dreams, she worked harder to prove herself—something that is common for women across the board. “Women are pressured to prove themselves every day,” she says. In all of this, what stood her in good stead was the support of her husband and her parents, and her passion to make a difference through her work.

Today, Dr. Sehrish is an inspiration for countless young women. And she encourages each one to believe in herself and her capacity to change the world. “I wanted to make a positive impact, change how systems work, and not be a passive on-looker,” she says, “I wanted to be a catalyst for change.” She is a catalyst for social change, and her story an inspiring example of how leadership can transcend personal achievement and contribute significantly to societal progress and empowerment.

ہم
پس پوز
I am Truth





HARSHINI KANHEKAR

AGARTALA, TRIPURA

“Everybody says I have broken the glass ceiling, but it was not intentional. I was not thinking about breaking barriers... I want to keep working.”



"I remember well that as a child my father would not allow anyone to so much as suggest what I should wear, so it's not surprising that no one could dictate my life choices to me. I grew up in an environment of total support from my family. It's because of this that I could study and I could dream."

Harshini's dream was to join the armed forces. When she did, the challenges came from what the system forced her to confront, and her victories came from her steadfast refusal to give in to any such roadblocks. "People's mentality is the main obstruction I've faced; their mindset is that women should stay at home and take care of babies and cooking. But I was fortunate to have a family that not only encouraged my education, but also never discriminated between my brother and me."

Previous page: Harshini Kanhekar provides instructions to colleagues from her fire truck at the ONGC fire-station in Agartala.

This page: Harshini captured quickly fixing her field uniform in front of a mirror

Page on right: Harshini at the ONGC fire station in Agartala, taking out her formal uniform from its cover.

Next page: Harshini at her office, dressed in her formal uniform.





Harshini's journey brought her to the National Fire Services College (NFSC), which was, at the time, an all-male bastion. She was told they'd never had a female student before. She wasn't deterred and her refusal to step back opened the doors not only for her but for the many women who followed.

At 26, she became the first woman fire officer in India. The move from an all-woman college where she studied, to an all-male institution that she transformed, was Harshini's greatest challenge.

Later, she went on to join the Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) and here too, she remained committed to challenging patriarchy and creating opportunities for women.

For Harshini, breaking barriers is not a conscious project she takes on, it is just something she does. As she says, "Everybody says I have broken the glass ceiling, but it was not intentional. I was not thinking about breaking barriers... I want to keep working and growing each day. I want to inspire others to follow their dreams."

Harshini epitomizes pioneering leadership, not just in her field but in the broader context of challenging gender stereotypes and empowering others. Her journey demonstrates how individual resolve and professional excellence can become powerful tools in dismantling barriers and inspiring a new generation of leaders across traditionally male-dominated fields.

हम हैं अविरत
I am Persistent





JHULAN GOSWAMI

CHAKDAHA, WEST BENGAL

“I want to see the
Indian team lift the
World Cup”



Jhulan Goswami, 39, had a single childhood dream: to play cricket for India. In the bylanes of Chakdaha, a remote village in West Bengal, she batted, bowled, fielded, caught, little knowing that one day, she would become a skilled wicket-taker with nearly 355 wickets to her credit.

Jhulan's cricketing career was not only about numbers: very quickly she became an inspiration for young women wanting to be cricketers and her name became synonymous with women's cricket. "In 1997, as a young woman, I watched the Australia-New Zealand one-day match at Eden Gardens, Kolkata. I knew then that I wanted to play cricket professionally. Sachin Tendulkar became my role model. I decided that, come what may, I would stay with cricket. And I did."

Previous page: Jhulan Goswami, warming up at the Eden Gardens stadium, Kolkata.

This page: A close-up of the iconic cricketer.

Page on right: Jhulan Goswami practicing throw and catch with the cricket ball. Jhulan Goswami mentoring the next generation of budding cricketers.

Next page: Jhulan Goswami pictured in front of her trophy cabinet.





Cricket has largely been a male sport. Not surprisingly, Jhulan's family wasn't happy at this passion of hers. But her coach convinced them to let her play for two years with the Bengal team, promising that she would leave if it did not work out. For Jhulan, there was never any question of leaving though. At 15, she travelled nearly 100 kilometres to Kolkata three times a week to train. She likes to say, "What saw me through were my three Ds – discipline, determination and dedication."

When Jhulan started playing the game, women's cricket in India did not have many takers. She survived with little money and low recognition. Throughout, her strength lay in her acute awareness of her body and its capabilities. She honed her skills, and perfected a steady delivery, one that helped her outwit Australia's Meg Lanning during the 2017 World Cup semi-final. Her performance as a fast bowler drew loud cheers from the stands, especially from the women.

In 2022, Jhulan called it a day. As she walked out after her final game at Lord's Stadium in England, Indian and British cricketers lined up to form a guard of honour for her. Retirement hasn't dimmed Jhulan's enthusiasm and commitment to the game. Today, from outside the boundary, she mentors, scouts, and sponsors cricket training and education for girls from humble backgrounds. "I want young women in India not to fear pressure and to seek their passion as if their lives depended on it."

Jhulan's story is a beacon of inspirational leadership in women's cricket. Her journey from a village in West Bengal to the international cricketing arena is a testament to the power of dreams, hard work, and resilience. She has not only excelled in her sport but has also played a pivotal role in inspiring and nurturing the next generation of female cricketers, transforming the landscape of women's cricket in India.

I am Speed





LARISHISHA PDAHSIEJ

SHILLONG, MEGHALAYA

“Many people did not trust me, and I had to be patient and persistent to win people over and start the process of changing their perceptions about women and their role in local governance.”



Larishisha Pdahsiej's life changed when she was handpicked to participate in a government training programme for local communities in natural resource management. In the community she comes from in Meghalaya's Mawtangor village, women are not expected to participate in decision-making.

Larishisha's journey took her into the heart of the community where she became a community facilitator. This position was hard-earned. She had to undergo rigorous training to equip herself with the knowledge and skills needed for managing natural resources, working towards sustainable practices, and importantly, being able to communicate these to the community.

Once trained, Larishisha and her fellow facilitators became the support

Previous page: Larishisha pauses amid tea bushes, with a bamboo tea-picking basket on her back.

This page: Larishisha waters her plants.

Page on right: Larishisha walks through a tea garden and later spends time with her family.

Next page: Larishisha meets with her community to discuss innovative conservation ideas.





their community needed to find innovative solutions to the issues confronting them. In the many meetings and discussions they organized, they focused on the importance of making informed decisions in conservation planning.

It wasn't always easy: there was resistance and disagreements within the community. "Many people did not trust me and I had to be patient and persistent to win people over and start the process of changing their perceptions about women and their role in local governance. Today, things are different, they come to me with their questions." The trust, once earned, brought its own reward. Larishisha became part of a team that submitted a comprehensive natural resource management plan for her village that included proposals for forestry, planting and the construction of an irrigation channel, a testament to their dedication and commitment to collectively reshaping their community's approach to resource management.

Larishisha describes herself as 'trei shitom', a Khasi term for 'hard working'. But she also acknowledges the support of her family, "Sometimes when I feel tired and drained, my father reminds me that I'm making a contribution to society, and he supports me by assisting with household tasks."

Larishisha Pdahsiej's leadership is characterized by resilience, effective community engagement, and the ability to inspire trust and collaboration. Her story is a powerful illustration of the impact women can have in leadership roles, particularly in areas traditionally dominated by men. Today, as part of a growing network of over 3,000 facilitators, with women constituting a significant majority, Larishisha is not just a leader in her community but a beacon of hope and empowerment for women in environmental stewardship and governance.

Nga **trei shitom**

I am Hardworking





AISHWARYA BODDAPATI

HYDERABAD, TELANGANA

“Grab every
opportunity you get.”



Aishwarya Boddapati's story exemplifies that true leadership lies in navigating uncharted waters with courage and conviction, transforming not just paths but perceptions, and paving the way for others to follow. Whenever I tell people about the amazing voyage I went on, their first response is to joke and then to ask me how my mother allowed me to go on it," says Aishwarya Boddapati.

Imagine a group of women on a ship circumnavigating the globe; 254 days on the seas, rough weather, difficult conditions, loneliness, and finally a

Previous page: Aishwarya Boddapati, part of the pioneering all-women's crew that circumnavigated the globe aboard 'Tarini'.

This page: Aishwarya had voluntarily retired from the navy but continues to participate in races across India to promote sailing.

Page on right: Aishwarya is one of the first woman naval officers to be awarded the Gallantry Nao Sena Medal in 2018. She is a recipient of the prestigious Nari Shakti Puraskar and Tenzing Norgay National Adventure award 2017.

Next page: Aishwarya Boddapati, and the crew of Tarini, laid to rest the many prejudices about women sailing all over the world, including the belief that women are unlucky for ships or that they're not physically capable to sail.





triumphant entry into Goa at the end of the trip. This is exactly what Aishwarya did when she undertook, what came to be known as the Navika Sagar Parikrama. At the time, she was working with the Indian Navy to design, construct and repair warships and submarines, a task requiring much precision and expertise. Then, an amazing opportunity came her way.

The Navy put out a call for women officers to volunteer for a global expedition. By this time, Aishwarya had discovered her love for adventure sports. She volunteered and was selected. She would now travel with an all-woman crew on the vessel Tarini.

This was at a time when the Navy did not post women officers in warships. Their concern was that since the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans are not surrounded by open lands, things could get challenging for women. So, for the women, who would take Tarini across and around the globe, everything

on the ship was new. They had to learn it all—from weather phenomena to medical emergencies, to dealing with injuries, working with the nuts and bolts, and surviving on the sea.

They did it all and made history when they successfully completed their voyage. There were accolades, but there was also scepticism. “Even when we’d done that,” Aishwarya says, “people would say it was lady luck that did it, not us.” This wasn’t surprising. There are many prejudices about women sailing all over the world: it’s believed they can’t do the hard labour that is required, that they are unlucky for ships, that they’re not physically capable.

The crew of Tarini, however, put an end to these beliefs once and for all. As Aishwarya says, “Being a trailblazer comes with its challenges, facing numerous obstacles to achieve one’s goals.”

हम हैं बल
I am Strength





BHABANI MUNDA

JALPAIGURI, WEST BENGAL

“মেয়েরা যখন ফুটবল খেলে
তা লিঙ্গ পক্ষপাতের
বিরুদ্ধে প্রতিবাদ।”

*“Football for me is about unity. When girls
play football they are standing united against
biases.”*



As the football sped towards her, Bhabani Munda, a 32-year-old tribal woman from Kalchini in Jalpaiguri district, lifted her foot and gave it a good, hard kick. Thrilled, she watched it soar away and remembered how, years ago, her seven-year-old self had fallen in love with the sport. Today, for Bhabani, football was no longer just a sport, instead it had become a way of breaking social barriers and gender stereotypes, and of providing opportunities for women and tribal girls.

There was a time, for Bhabani, when the fight was really basic. She wasn't allowed to go out, wearing shorts was forbidden, her brother—who played freely—told her that if she tried, she might break her leg and then 'no one would marry her.'

Previous page: Bhabani Munda watches her team Dooars XI practice.

This page: Bhabani Munda demonstrates her dribbling skills with the football.

Page on right: Bhabani Munda's foot ball team mid-practice. Bhabani Munda with her children and with the younger members of her football team, preparing for a match.

Next page: Bhabani Munda mid-practice with her team Dooars XI.





But nothing could stop Bhabani. She played regardless: no jersey, no football boots, no nutrition, no support, no money. But plenty of passion. She played district football and put her heart and soul into it. And then she did more. She'd wake at 3, do all her domestic chores, tend to her small snack shop and then go door-to-door trying to convince parents to let their daughters play. She was clear what she wanted: more women on the field who'd make football their own and who would eventually be able to call the shots in their lives. She formed her own team, all tribal girls, Dooars XI, who have played in major tournaments and brought home trophies. Nothing distracted her from her goal, not even offers to coach teams overseas. Her priority was very clear—to keep her team of women together, and to see they

were healthy and fit, even if that meant she had to work to generate extra funds.

A recipient of the Bangla Ratna award, Bhabani has now transformed into a community leader and works for the oppressed in her community. Her vision is clear: empowering women through football, fostering health and fitness, and enabling them to take control of their lives. Her message to Indian women resonates with empowerment: “Go after your dreams and put power into your kick to turn them into reality.”

I am Unity





DEVIKA MALIK

NOIDA, UTTAR PRADESH

“All decisions, whether its designing policies or physical spaces, should be made keeping in mind the needs of the differently-abled.”



There's a memory that Devika holds close to her heart. A young, differently-abled girl reached out to her on social media. "You're an inspiration," she told her, "Can you speak to my parents and persuade them that there is nothing to be ashamed of in disability, that they should bring up their child with pride?"

Devika Malik, a disability rights activist and a successful para-athlete, who won three medals at the IPC Athletics Grand Prix, and multiple golds at the National Para-Athletics Championships between 2010 and 2015, was raised by a mother who, despite being paralyzed below the chest, made sure that her daughter, who was born with hemiplegia (which causes paralysis to one side of the body), did not give up on her dreams and aspirations because of her disability. Devika, in turn, noticed

Previous page: Devika Malik, a disability rights activist and a successful para-athlete, in the middle of a training session.

This page: Devika Malik, who won three medals at the IPC Athletics Grand Prix, and multiple golds at the National Para-Athletics Championships between 2010 and 2015, draped in the Indian tri-colour.

Page on right: Glimpses from Devika Malik's gruelling daily training session.

Next page: Devika Malik with a co-para athlete after a training session.





how her mother was able to perform most tasks despite her handicap. "I realized," she says, "that even in a educated and upper middle-class society, there is such a regressive attitude about people with disabilities. That made me understand how difficult the conditions of people from vulnerable sections of society must be."

She set up the Wheeling Happiness Foundation. They worked to raise funds for people with disabilities, ensure better access and treatment for people facing physical, emotional and social challenges, and ensuring inclusivity in sports.

At the heart of the Foundation, is Devika's deep conviction that "sport can be a strong unifying force and can help to hold communities together."

But Devika's interests also went beyond the immediate functioning of her Foundation. She wanted to make sure that "All decisions, whether its designing policies or physical spaces, were made through the lens of the needs of people with disabilities."

"You don't have to be born with disability, any freak accident or even old age can make you susceptible to it," she says. "Disability is a part of our lives, whether its personal or somebody we know. Thus, society must be more inclusive." Devika's work, her belief and confidence in herself, has made her an inspiration for many. She was one of only two young people, who were chosen from across the Commonwealth, to speak at the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2018 (CHOGM) in London in front of Heads of State of 53 nations, including the Indian Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi and the entire Royal Family. She also addressed high-level stakeholders at the first-ever global Disability Summit in London in 2018. She also featured in the Forbes' 30 under 30 list in 2020.

Devika's story serves as a powerful source of motivation and hope for many, especially given her success in overcoming personal challenges. She is both an inspiring figure and a dedicated advocate for the rights and dignity of people with disabilities. Her story is an inspiring example of how leadership can be a force for positive change, breaking down barriers and fostering a more inclusive society.

हम हैं हम
I am Steadfast





MANASI MONDAL

*NORTH 24 PARGANAS,
WEST BENGAL*

“I don’t need anyone’s permission to stop anything which I feel is not right around me.”



“During Covid-19, many schools were shut down and children were at home with little to do. Parents were concerned that if they remained idle it would be difficult to motivate them to go back to school.” Manasi worked with the local panchayat and the community to identify at-risk children and developed activities to support their education.

It was at a camp organized by Aangan, an NGO that works with local women, training them to be champions of child protection, that Manasi discovered her true calling. The women the NGO trained emerged as formidable leaders and played key roles in village life, particularly at times of disasters in climate-vulnerable coastal regions of Bengal.

Previous page: Manasi Mondal, a community leader in Hingalganj, who works with child protection issues especially the impact of migration on children.

This page: Manasi Mondal checking on jute fibres that has been hung out to dry before being sent to the mills for processing.

Page on right: In the heart of Hingalganj, Manasi Mondal takes on the role of not just a leader but also a teacher.

Next page: Manasi Mondal explaining the importance of agency to a woman in her community.





Manasi learnt to communicate, to identify child protection issues, to work hard, and to understand the impact of migration in the lives of the children. With support from schoolteachers, the pradhan and community members, Manasi started working at the grassroots level, often intervening in child marriage cases by speaking to the parents. "In this place," Manasi says, "young women barely step out of their houses. At first, I faced a lot of opposition from people. My family was afraid that the community would not welcome my involvement, and issues related to my work might come into the home." Fortunately, her husband stood by her, and that helped allay some of the anxieties.

Manasi's strategy was to work with families, engage them in conversation, make them aware of the consequences of child marriage and impress upon them the importance of choice.

She made sure she met with the women in relaxed settings, often in the evenings when they sat down to make bidis,

and she would encourage open dialogue and discussion. Dialogue, Manasi believes, is key to understanding. Often people push a problem away thinking it is not happening to them, it's somewhere out there. Manasi says, "I work to prevent child marriage. But there are a lot of women who are already married. To them I say, if you close your eyes to a situation you know to be wrong, and if you think it's not happening in your own family, there will be a time when what is happening around you will impact your children and family too."

Through her grassroots leadership, Manasi has become a symbol of the 'projapoti' (butterfly) – signifying transformation and hope. Her work in advocating against child marriage and for child rights stands as a testament to the impact of dedicated, empathetic leadership at the community level.

হুম হাঁ পরজাপতি
I am a Butterfly

NILOFER

MUMBAI, MAHARASHTRA

“We need to facilitate a dignified life for our transgender community – and that is only possible when we include them in mainstream society.”







When Nilofer was growing up and discovering her sexuality, there wasn't even an adequate vocabulary to describe what she was feeling: "Back in the day when I was trying to figure myself out, the word transgender wasn't common. Society would refer to us as chakka and hijra." Today, Nilofer is proud to call herself a transwoman, and her life's work has become to fight for the rights of trans persons.

Electric shocks to 'cure' her gender dysphoria, isolation and bullying at school, rejection by society, Nilofer has seen it all. But, following her own dictum to be "determined, hopeful and empowered", Nilofer fought for the rights of her community and succeeded. "Today, many parents are beginning to accept their children as trans, bisexual, lesbian, whatever it might be. Witnessing this is very overwhelming."

Previous page: Nilofer interacting with hospital staff during a transgender sensitivity training.

Page on right: Nilofer presenting during her transgender sensitivity workshop for medical professionals.

Next page: Nilofer interacts with participants after her transgender sensitivity workshop with medical professionals.





It was a chance meeting with Ashok Row Kavi, the founder of the Humsafar Trust, that proved to be the catalyst for change. She began to volunteer with the organization, helping to distribute condoms, learning computer skills and went on to become a training officer. Her mission is to foster inclusion and build dignity. To this end she organizes trainings and sensitization workshops for corporate and government officials, assists in upskilling programmes, especially for those who want to move into different professions after their studies. She also works to support trans entrepreneurs to launch and sustain their businesses. Many challenges remain, however. According to Nilofer, “a vision for systemic change that doesn’t align with popular thinking in development, is not easy to achieve.” But the key to all this, she believes, is education, this, for her, is the cornerstone of empowerment for trans people.

Nilofer’s story is one of resilience, determination and sustained pursuit of her goal to build a truly inclusive world. As she says, “there is no limit to what we, as women, can achieve. Don’t be afraid to focus on your goal. Be determined, be hopeful and you will be empowered. And in this way, we will be closer to achieving our goal of including the trans community into the mainstream and ensuring they live dignified lives.”

Her story symbolizes the quest for a more inclusive world, where the trans community is integrated into mainstream society and lives with dignity. Her message is clear: with determination and hope, empowerment follows, bringing us closer to achieving true inclusivity.

I am Hope

PAVITHRA YS

BENGALURU, KARNATAKA

“ಒಂದು ತಾಯಿಯಾಗಿ,
ಮಡದಿಯಾಗಿ, ಸಹೋದರಿಯಾಗಿ
ಅಥವಾ ವೃತ್ತಿಪರಳಾಗಿ ನಿಮ್ಮ
ದನಿಯ ಶಕ್ತಿಯನ್ನು ಎಂದಿಗೂ
ಕಡೆಗಣಿಸಬೇಡಿ.”

*“Don't underestimate the power of your voice,
as a mother, wife, sister or professional.”*







"Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. We are all one family and every member brings value in some form, however different."

As a little girl, Pavithra was deeply impacted by watching her mother treat slum dwellers in her clinic, and the gratitude she received from her patients.

Perhaps it was with this in mind that Pavithra started Vindhya, a not-for-profit BPO which employed only disabled people and senior citizens.

At the time she did this, inclusivity and diversity had only begun to be discussed. Pavithra knew she wanted to support her colleagues and ensure they were financially independent so that they could lead lives of dignity. "While most people acknowledged that this was a good thing, the idea

Previous page: Pavithra interacts with kids in the day care center at Vindhya.

This page: Pavithra with Ms Vijayalakshmi, a Vindhya employee.

Page on right: A look at the Vindhya office in Bengaluru and its employees, alongside a close-up of its inclusive infrastructure.

Next page: Pavithra at the Vindhya office





did not find immediate acceptability", says Pavithra. "People were not sure it was workable, would the workforce be able to perform, would they be able to meet deadlines, what were their capabilities—these were all questions we were asked."

Pavithra put a lot of time into training her colleagues, working on their soft skills, but growth was slow. At one point she almost gave up, but the thought of what this would do to her colleagues kept her going. They cut costs, some had to be laid off. To help employees the office space was turned into living quarters at night and people could sleep there and save rent. People also began to share meals, creating a family-like atmosphere. Seeing the entire community come forward to support each other was just the impetus Pavithra needed to try harder.

She sharpened her entrepreneurial skills by enrolling for an MBA in IIM Bengaluru, followed by a fellowship at the

University of Oxford, UK. Back in India, she repositioned Vindhya as a quality product that offered the added bonus of a social cause. This approach was embraced by corporates and entrepreneurs alike. Pavithra's vision coupled with the staunch loyalty of her employees inspired many organizations to amend their hiring policies to be more inclusive. "We now have evergreen contracts with our clients, which read "The contract remains valid until we exist, or you exist."

Pavithra's leadership style is a unique blend of Empathetic and Visionary Leadership. She has not only created a sustainable business model but has also fostered an inclusive workplace that values and empowers every individual, regardless of their physical abilities. Her work is a testament to the power of empathy, resilience, and visionary leadership in creating a more inclusive and equitable world.

हम हैं स्वच्छन्द
I am a Free Spirit





AKANKSHA SOOD

NOIDA, UTTAR PRADESH

“It’s on our generation to make sure that our daughters don’t imbibe the conditioning we had. Our daughters deserve to inherit a new world.”



“The jungle is my workplace,” says Akanksha Sood, wildlife film maker. “And I take my kids to work.”

Akanksha has effectively challenged the myth of the jungle being the domain of the so-called ‘Alpha male,’ whether man or animal. Flanked by her children, she occupies the terrain of the wild, points her camera lens at it and makes it her own.

The rough terrain, the unrelenting topography, gruelling physical labour, the harsh climate—none of this deters her. Akanksha knows that when she stands firm, her camera in her hand, she is standing on the shoulders of many other women, who have similarly worked in the wild, against all odds, often for the sheer joy of it. “Women in films are celebrated. Women journalists and scientists are felicitated. But the women of the wild are not even acknowledged.”

Previous page: Akanksha Sood looks at her awards and recognitions wall.

Page on the right: Akanksha Sood scouting with her crew to shoot an episode on resident flamingos in the outskirts of Gurugram. Later she discusses a sequence with her colleagues.

Next page: Akanksha Sood brainstorming with her crew.





This is why she launched Women of the Wild, a digital space to collect stories of these intrepid women. Soon, Women of the Wild became an acknowledgment of all the brave women who were working in the field with a connect to the natural world, and creating a pathway for younger women. “You don’t have to be a filmmaker, an environmentalist, a park ranger or a vet, you can just as easily be a lawyer, journalist, graphic designer, data analyst, researcher, GPS scientist, an artist or an animal whisperer,” she says.

Akanksha has won three National Film Awards, a Wildscreen nomination, a UN Film Award, and recently, the World’s Emerging Documentarian Award. But it wasn’t easy for Akanksha to make her place in the world of wildlife film making— a male dominated industry. “I do not have a film school background like all my contemporaries, and for that I was written off by many in the industry,” she says. People laughed at her, calling her ‘woh media wali’ (that media type). “It’s hard work,” she says, “to build trust in a woman’s capabilities in this world.”

Women of the Wild, which is today 10,000 members strong, is a community of pooled resources and shared learnings. Verified users can share anonymous reviews on all organizations in this sector, making it a powerful tool to enhance the work ethic and drive better practices. “It’s our generation’s responsibility to make sure that our daughters don’t imbibe the conditioning we had,” Akanksha says. “Our daughters deserve to inherit a new, equal world.”

Akanksha has created a supportive community that not only acknowledges the contributions of women in wildlife fields but also actively works to dismantle barriers and pave the way for future generations of women leaders; it’s a movement that brings about lasting change.

True leadership is about crafting a vision that shatters ceilings, nurturing a space where passions thrive, and building a legacy of empowerment for generations to come. That would also sum up Akanksha’s work.

I am a Mother Ship





BANDANA DEVI

*FATEHPUR, UTTAR
PRADESH*

“You may face tough challenges today, but if you face them head-on, you will reach your destination tomorrow.”



Facing her personal challenges head on, Bandana has also inspired others through her actions and perseverance. She transformed her situation to benefit her family and community, especially in her work to support adolescent girls, and pregnant and lactating women.

Bandana Devi, a 39-year-old woman from Fatehpur, Uttar Pradesh, has a saying: “Challenges may be tough today, but if you face them head on, you’ll be sure to reach your destination tomorrow.” This motto became especially meaningful when her life took an unexpected turn.

Living a stable life with her husband and kids, Bandana’s world was suddenly shaken. Her husband, who used to earn well, fell into bad

Previous page: Bandana Devi is the President of Jagriti Mahila Prema Laghu Udyog, a production unit focusing on nutritious products for adolescent girls, as well as pregnant and lactating women.

Page on right: Bandana Devi at the production unit of Jagriti Mahila Prema Laghu Udyog in Kanpur’s Bindki region. A close look at a typical working day at the production unit.

Next page: Bandana Devi catches a light moment with her team.





company and started wasting their money. Suddenly, Bandana found herself with barely Rs 500 to manage her household for a whole month. She wondered what to do next. Her top priority was her children's education. "I was determined not to let my children's education suffer, even if the times were tough. I tightened my belt and cut down on household expenses, and their education continued," Bandana recalls.

The next step was to find a job, but that wasn't easy. Not only did she have to convince her family, but she also had to figure out who would take care of the house while she was away. Unwilling to give up, Bandana came up with a strategy: she convinced a relative to persuade her family to let her step out. "Eventually, it was their support that enabled me to leave my home and continue my work, which has led me to where I am today," she says.

Bandana landed a job managing finances for a group that assists people with funds for social services and paying off

bank loans, which added Rs 1,000 to her family's income. Her hard work paid off, and she soon became the President of Jagriti Mahila Prema Laghu Udyog, a production unit focusing on nutritious products for adolescent girls, as well as pregnant and lactating women. Now, both her family and community see her as an important asset. "I've done a lot for my community, and I am proud of my contribution," Bandana says.

Bandana's story is about rising from life's trials with a resolve to empower not just oneself, but to uplift and nurture the community around her. Her journey of turning personal adversity into an opportunity to lead and serve her community, highlights her role as a transformative figure who not only changed her own circumstances but also made significant contributions to the welfare of others around her.

हम हैं फ़राख़ हौसला
I am Audacious Courage





CHANDA BAI MEENA

PRATAPGARH, RAJASTHAN

“Women in my community encouraged me to become the sarpanch of the village. That inspired me.”



Chanda Bai's close connection to her community and her efforts to address their specific needs, her approach to involving the community in decision-making and resource management, underscores that true leadership is like waves—powerful and constant, moving steadily to uplift and carry forward every member of the community.

Chanda Bai describes herself as 'lahar or 'wave'—a force that takes everyone and everything along by sheer persistence and will power. Chanda Bai Meena had never imagined that she could become the Sarpanch of Kulthana Gram Panchayat. Social norms, a lack of education, and domestic responsibilities, and most importantly, a lack of self-confidence have traditionally held women back from leadership roles. But for Chanda Bai it was her village sisters who were instrumental in changing things:

Previous page: Chanda Bai Meena is the Sarpanch of Kulthana Gram Panchayat.

This page: Chanda Bai Meena catches a quiet moment, cuddling her goat.

Page on right: A glimpse of Chanda Bai Meena's busy day, from hosting a meeting with her FES workers to helping women farmers load their produce on trucks.

Next page: Chanda Bai Meena conducts an informal meeting with her team.





“Women in my community encouraged me to become the sarpanch of the village, that inspired me.”

She set to work with gusto: the first priority was education. “I received some education but not much, my family had some financial constraints.” This made her all the more determined to ensure that women became involved in education, health and resource management. One thing led to another and never shy of learning, Chanda Bai turned her attention to land restoration, and began to attend capacity building trainings. Taking a leaf out of the example set by the Foundation for Ecological Security, she began to focus on the role of communities functioning as units in resource management and protection. She encouraged her community to “focus on the protection and regeneration of common lands through check dams and farm bunds and to plant native species.”

Chanda Bai’s day begins early. “I first take care of my household responsibilities and manage my farmland. And by midday I’m at the Panchayat office, doing what I have to do.” And there is a lot she is required to do because she doesn’t just sit in her office but goes out into the field. In one instance, she received complaints about the warden of a girls’ hostel who mistreated the girls under her care and denied them basic things like sanitary pads, soap, etc. Chanda Bai spent a night at the hospital to get first-hand knowledge and, armed with this, she acted against the warden. Her persistent and inclusive efforts to bring about positive change are a model of how one can use personal experiences and community support to overcome traditional barriers and become a force for progress and empowerment.

हम हैं लहर
I am a Wave





KANEEZ FATMA

*AZAMGARH,
UTTAR PRADESH*

“When women work to empower their sisters, they also empower themselves, building a formidable solidarity that can tackle insurmountable odds.”



Kaneez Fatma describes herself as ‘hawa’ or the wind, and indeed, in her pursuit of her goals, she has been like the wind—strong, motivated, resilient. Her wish to study was vociferously opposed by the people of her community. But her father stood firm against them and ensured that Kaneez finished her schooling.

Kaneez wasn’t going to stop there. She wanted to take the next step and study law. Although she succeeded in doing this, it wasn’t easy—she faced rampant sexism and constant threats in the hostel she lived in. Even owning a mobile phone was seen as an act of rebellion. “Men used to come up to me and ask my ‘rate’ for the night, and threaten to break into my house at night because they knew I lived alone. It was scary. But I had no other option but to endure this if I wanted to finish my degree.”

Previous page: Kaneez Fatma addresses a women’s group meeting educating them about their basic rights, spreading legal awareness and how to seek legal help for domestic violence, Azamgarh, UP

Page on right: Kaneez Fatma with her team members, Anshumala Singh and Soni Yadav, interacting with a group of rural women. Kaneez Fatma is committed to AALI’s mandate of legal literacy.

Next page: Kaneez Fatma counsels a group of adolescent girls at a minority settlement.





The transformation in Kaneez's life began in 2013 when she received an invitation to work with a locally based organization in Uttar Pradesh, AALI (Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiatives). She initially joined the organization to be able to earn enough to fund her education but so impressed was she with the work of the organization that as soon as she graduated, she came back and joined them. "I wish my parents could've afforded English medium education for me. Perhaps I could've gone further in life then. But I don't blame them; they dealt with opposition from the villagers simply so I could go to school."

Committed, passionate, and hardworking, Kaneez worked in AALI and at the same time, took up a number of other courses because she wanted to learn more. In this, her story is not only her personal story but the perseverance and ambition she demonstrated is also the story of hundreds of other women who have been empowered through legal literacy. AALI's focus on legal literacy education ensured that its caseworkers not only understand what feminism is and how patriarchy works but they also know the importance of

a rights-based approach. With this background, they work with women to enable them to understand how to navigate the legal system to claim their rights.

Many of AALI's caseworkers, women like Kaneez, have often been at the receiving end of violence and a patriarchal system themselves and this is what enables them to build solidarity with other survivors. "When women work to empower their sisters, they also empower themselves, building a formidable solidarity that can tackle insurmountable odds."

Kaneez Fatma exemplifies empowering leadership through legal literacy. Her journey highlights the transformative power of education and solidarity in challenging and changing oppressive systems. Her leadership is a beacon of hope and strength, demonstrating how personal resilience can translate into collective empowerment and societal change.

हम हैं हवा
I am Wind





KAVITA CHARPOTA

BANSWARA, RAJASTHAN

“I encourage women to be courageous and resilient. They should not be afraid to raise their voices and support each other.”



In Kavita's native village, Banswara, young girls are expected to drop out of school after the eighth grade. Educated only till the 10th grade herself, Kavita made it her mission to persuade her community about the importance of education, health and decision-making for young women.

No wonder then that at the young age of 33, Kavita is known affectionately as 'adhyaksh' or 'leader'. Among her many achievements is the central role she has played in connecting women from low-income families to self-help groups in order to help improve their livelihoods. An early challenge was financial hardship. She overcame this with the help of the Rural Development and Self Employment

Previous page: Kavita Charpota and Chetna Joshi on their way to meet a self-help group at Chidiyawasa Village in Rajasthan.

This page: Kavita and Geeta at Geeta's farm at Chidiyawasa village, Rajasthan.

Page on right: Women in the SHG pool small amounts of money for collective lending and borrowing, significantly enhancing their livelihoods. Kavita conducts an SHG meeting at Chidiyawasa Village, Rajasthan. Savita, one of the SHG members picks fruit from her farm at Chidiyawasa village, Rajasthan.

Next page: Kavita Charpota at Geeta's farm.





Training Institute (RSETI).“Once I understood how to address this challenge, I was able to help more women in my community to access the same training. I hope this helped to improve their access to finance through bank linkages.” Today, she can proudly claim that she has successfully mobilized and connected more than 200 families to the Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY) and the Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoty Bima Yojana (PMJJBY), both government insurance schemes. In her words, “My inspiration comes from seeing women empowered.”

It hasn't all been smooth sailing. A difficult moment came when Kavita tried to deal with the problem of excessive alcohol consumption, which led to higher levels of domestic violence. Here she faced opposition not only from the men in the village but also the alcohol sellers. But the women stood solidly behind her: “Men in the village initially opposed my efforts, but I persisted with immense support from women in the community.”

Kavita also set up the Van-Dhan Samiti, where she works with more than 300 members, mainly women, to help improve the natural resources and lives of her community. This group now acts as guardian to local forested regions, collecting natural produce to sell in the market. As Kavita says: “I want to encourage women not to stay at home, but to gather information from the government about how to support each other, and then do exactly that.”

Kavita Charpota's leadership exemplifies the power of grassroots efforts in empowering women. Her model of leadership, deeply rooted in community engagement and collective action, has not only transformed the lives of many in Banswara but also serves as an inspiring blueprint for sustainable development and empowerment at the community level.

हम हैं अधिनायक

I am a Leader





LAKI JANI

KORATPUR, ODISHA

“Education holds immense significance for me. I aspire to see my children receive a quality education, secure good jobs, and actively engage in serving the community.”



A tribal woman from Odisha, Laki Jani has no land of her own. She and her family work on land owned by others. There are times when they don't have enough to eat. And yet, Laki's dream is to help tribal women farmers to be independent and make their own decisions. She uses her knowledge to teach them sustainable farming techniques and organizes gatherings where she shares information about government schemes.

In 2018, Laki Jani joined the Foundation for Ecological Security as a Community Resource Person (CRP) for the Agriculture Production Cluster (APC) project. The project aimed to double farmers' income and promote organic farming in tribal villages. In the early days of her journey in Pakjhola Gram Panchayat, people doubted Laki's knowledge and often ignored her.

Previous page: A powerful image of solidarity, Laki Jani with other women farmers.

This page: Laki working alongside other women farmers in the field.

Page on right: Laki inspecting a groundnut seed planting machine. A close look at her organic farm.

Next page: Laki hosting a meeting with women farmers in the village.





‘I had to think on my feet. Once, I waited for a long time to meet a government officer. Then I persuaded the peon to give me his number, called him and told him I was waiting. It worked! He called me to his office to listen to my story.’

Laki’s work often takes her to remote villages where the infrastructure for transport is lacking or non-existent, and meetings can extend into late hours. At such times, her husband is a crucial pillar of support, he willingly goes to pick her up in order to ensure that she travels home safely.

At other times, as Laki says, “I just take my family along when I have to go long distances.” Over the years, Laki’s work has grown: earlier she worked with 13 villages in the panchayat, now she’s involved with two panchayats comprising 23 villages and has connected with 6000 women farmers. Laki is now Managing Director of Anchalika Mahila Farmers’ Producer Company.

Laki’s personality takes her beyond her role in APC, forming personal bonds with the women she educates. They

unhesitatingly reach out to her directly for advice whenever new crops are harvested. Till date, there are days when Laki Jani’s family doesn’t have enough food for themselves, despite this, Laki firmly believes in the importance of contributing to the community, emphasizing that humans should do more than just live for themselves. As she says, “From the very start, I’ve taught my children to be self-sufficient. Being hardworking individuals in agriculture, it’s essential that our children learn to be self-reliant and capable of looking after themselves.”

Laki Jani’s story is not just about overcoming personal hardships; it’s a narrative of empowering others, fostering self-reliance, and nurturing growth within the community. Her unwavering dedication to the betterment of tribal women farmers in Odisha serves as an inspiring example of how individual perseverance can spark widespread change and development.

I am a Pathbreaker





MALIKA VIRDI

SARMOLI, UTTARAKHAND

“ਮੈਨੂੰ ਸਭ ਤੋਂ ਵੱਡਾ ਸਮਰਥਨ ਉਹਨਾਂ ਲੋਕਾਂ ਤੋਂ ਮਿਲਦਾ ਹੈ ਜਿਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਨਾਲ ਮੈਂ ਮਿਲ ਕੇ ਚੁਨੌਤੀਆਂ ਦਾ ਸਾਮਨਾ ਕਿੱਤਾ ਹੈ ਅਤੇ ਜੀਤਾਂ ਦਾ ਜਸ਼ਨ ਮਨਾਇਆ ਹੈ। ਭਾਈਚਾਰਾ ਅਤੇ ਏਕਤਾ ਜ਼ਰੂਰੀ ਹੈ।”

“My biggest support comes from people with whom I’ve, both, encountered challenges and celebrated victories. Community and solidarity are vital.”



There was once a time when Malika Virdi, an active member of the urban autonomous women's movement, could be seen in campaigns and protest marches in the city. "The slogan of the women's movement – personal is political – resonated with me. It emphasized the need to take a stand in our own lives for the societal and political change we desire to see in the world."

A Punjabi by birth, Malika had seen her share of patriarchy in her life and she was determined to make things better. Overtime, as her understanding of discrimination grew deeper and she began to see the intersections of

Previous page: Malika Virdi is the founder of Maati Sangathan, a women's self-help group that works on domestic violence, agriculture and conservation, providing crisis intervention, combating alcoholism, and generating employment opportunities for women.

This page: Malika at her work desk.

Page on right: Glimpses of Malika's work day—receiving a briefing from team members Kamla Pandey and Beena Pandey; in a meeting with the volunteers of Himalayan Ark office, a community-based tourism organisation.

Next page: Malika meets with her team of women workers and volunteers.





gender, caste, community, she decided to move away from urban activism and made her life in a rural area that lies in the Himalayan region near the Nepal-Tibet border.

Here, working with local communities became a strong focus of her work. “The community I found within the women’s movement, and later in rural mountain communities keeps me going. My goal is to help amplify the voices of local communities using social media and digital platforms, ensuring we control our narratives and futures.”

She founded two organizations, a community-based tourism organization in Uttarakhand, and Voices of Rural India, a digital platform through which rural, marginalized communities work to amplify their voices. This helps raise awareness about the challenges and aspirations of communities, and in doing so, leads to greater understanding.

“My biggest support comes from people with whom I’ve, both, encountered challenges and celebrated victories. Community and solidarity are vital.” Malika describes herself in the Punjabi phrase, ‘charhdi kala’, which describes an amazing energy. And this is what she has: she’s stood for local elections and is now serving her second term as sarpanch of the Sarmoli Jainti Van Panchayat. And she is founder-member of Maati Sangathan, a women’s self-help group that works on domestic violence, agriculture and

conservation, providing crisis intervention, combating alcoholism, and generating employment opportunities for women.

Her biggest challenge is to counter the individualistic narrative of prevailing development models. Strength, she believes, comes from the collective and people must work together to become strong and so they are not alone. “Seek common cause for social justice and solidarity, not just within your gender but with all oppressed sections of society.”

Malika’s emphasis on seeking a common cause for social justice is precisely what has fostered a spirit of solidarity among the communities she works with, making them more inclusive and equitable. She has not only been instrumental in collectivizing people by sharpening their understanding of the challenges they face, but also helping them recognize that they are not alone in their struggles. Through her collaborative leadership, Malika Viridi has fostered a spirit of solidarity among the communities she works with. Her leadership style is a blend of activism, empathy, and collaborative empowerment, creating sustainable change at the grassroots level.

हम हैं चरुदी कला
I am Charhdi Kala

PALLABI GHOSH

LUMDING, ASSAM

“Survivors who have experienced the horrors of trafficking firsthand, possess invaluable insights to inform effective policies.”







Pallabi Ghosh remembers seeing a man weep as his young daughter had gone missing in broad daylight. The incident set her on a path to probe the murky world of trafficking and the tears, despair and stigma associated with it.

Pallabi became a human rights activist, who works to free young people from modern slavery, forced labour, organ donation, forced marriages and prostitution. She has rescued over 10,000 women, young people and children. She's led many raids and rescue operations across India and is very aware that young lives are particularly vulnerable after they have been rescued. She says, "We need to rehabilitate the survivors through community support and skills for them to lead a life with dignity."

Previous page: Pallabi Ghosh is a human rights activist, who works to free young people from modern slavery, forced labour, organ donation, forced marriages and prostitution.

This page: Pallabi Ghosh counselling rescued survivors of human trafficking.

Page on right: Pallabi interacting with children at an awareness workshop. Pallabi alongside her family members and a volunteer at their home in Kanpur. Pallabi sharing a moment with her family.

Next page: Pallabi in deep discussion with a volunteer at a cafe in Kanpur.





Pallabi creates awareness of trafficking through workshops, training sessions, advocacy work via her NGO, Impact and Dialogue Foundation. She is convinced that stopping trafficking is not something a single individual can do. Rather it needs the efforts of society as a whole. Her team can often be seen at railway stations, talking to tea stall owners and workers, alerting them to the dangers of trafficking, and she often receives calls from passengers about possible cases.

Today, Pallabi often receives watermelons and thank-you notes carved in sand from young girls in rural India who have been rescued from being trafficked and who are now self-confident young individuals. She has no shortage of

threats as well, but these she takes in her stride. “If awareness of trafficking spreads, people will take up cases and help us to help the women.”

Pallabi Ghosh’s tireless efforts and leadership in the field of human rights and anti-trafficking work showcase the power of advocacy and community engagement in tackling complex social issues. Her work not only rescues and rehabilitates victims but also fosters a culture of vigilance and empowerment, paving the way for a future where human trafficking is no longer a hidden scourge.

হুম হুঁ নিভর্য
I am Fearless

SARASWATI DEVI

DEOGHAR, JHARKHAND

“I faced difficulties at home, especially when I started raising my voice against child marriage.”







Twenty-four-year-old Saraswati Devi was only 16 when she was married. “My father married me off, I wasn’t even of legal age,” she says. Her journey of change began in 2018 when she joined PCI India’s Project Umang, a socio-ecological programme that makes interventions at the individual, family, community and system levels with a gender-transformative approach in order to make a difference in society. It was here that she underwent training and began to understand the detrimental effects of early marriage.

The training gave Saraswati the confidence to speak up. Along with other women from her community, she began to conduct sessions to educate people and spread awareness about

Previous page: Saraswati Devi stops her scooter to engage with young schoolgirls.

This page: Saraswati talks to a young girl, encouraging her to pursue her education.

Page on right: Glimpses of Saraswati’s work, including conducting a gender sensitization session in a school, and a community meeting.

Next page: Saraswati conducts a meeting with women from her community, sensitising them on the importance of education.





child marriage. Her aim was to ensure that young women did not have to go through what she had faced. Predictably, this did not go down well in her marital family, especially when she stood against the entire village to oppose the marriage of a 12-year-old girl.

Saraswati's refusal to falter in the face of challenges drove her to emerge as a fearless advocate for girls' education and a steadfast opponent of child marriage in her village. Over time, her efforts also sparked a noticeable change in attitudes within her community – with others, too, being more vocal against subjects that were earlier treated as 'the norm'. She now believes that her battle is no longer a solitary one. She does have regrets though – for the child marriages she was not able to stop. She says, "Looking back, I regret not stopping this one woman from getting married when

she was a child. If I'd had the courage to intervene then, she might have continued her education."

Saraswati now manages self-help groups in her village. Thankfully, her family has also come round and are now supportive of her cause. Saraswati describes her goal as "connecting people with education and making a difference." Clearly, this is a process she has begun both at home and outside.

Saraswati Devi's story is a testament to the power of resilience, education, and community engagement in challenging deep-rooted social norms. Her commitment to ending child marriage and fostering educational opportunities for girls in her village makes her a true champion for change, inspiring others to join her in this critical cause.

हम हैं स्पष्टवादी
I am Outspoken





SHRUTI NAGVANSHI

*VARANASI,
UTTAR PRADESH*

“The smiles on people’s faces when we bring them their rights are what keep me going.”



Shruti Nagvanshi's story—filled with determination and resilience—is extraordinary, not just because it's from a time when opportunities for girls were scarce, but also because her father was determined to pull her out of school after fifth grade. He felt that was enough education for her to be able to communicate through letters. But despite these early obstacles, and being married at 18, Shruti completed her graduation. Partly this was because of her mother's unwavering support and partly because Shruti was lucky that her husband, a social activist, encouraged her to continue to study and learn. "My husband's ideological support," she says, "has been invaluable."

Previous page: Shruti Nagvanshi is a social worker and a human rights activist.

This page: Shruti Nagvanshi at her office in Varanasi, UP

Page on right: Shruti and her team conducting a simple learning activity with a group of young schoolgirls. Shruti Nagvanshi with a local woman Savita at her home's nutri-garden. Shruti Nagvanshi counsels women workers regarding work, nutrition and basic earning rights.

Next page: Shruti Nagvanshi interacts with women in the Banarsi sari handloom community.





Together with her husband, Shruti dedicated herself to bringing positive change to marginalized communities. It began with her involvement in different local programmes in Varanasi, aimed at empowering and uplifting underprivileged communities. Subsequently, she connected with the Uttar Pradesh chapter of the UN Youth Organization, reinforcing her commitment to making a difference in the lives of those in need. For over two decades now, Shruti has been actively working in the field of human rights and social justice, advocating for the rights of Dalit and Adivasi communities through campaigns and movements aimed at fighting discrimination and injustice. She is also the founder of the Savitri Bai Phule Mahila Panchayat, a women's collective that seeks to empower religious minorities. She co-founded the Jan Mitra Nyas and People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights (JMN/PVCHR), an organization that works to break the culture of silence and curb the systemic abuse of marginalized communities, in order to create a world where everyone can live with dignity.

Shruti's journey hasn't been without its fair share of challenges, though. She faced resistance from powerful figures. Initially, her parents-in-law, too, were uncomfortable with Shruti and her husband working for the 'untouchables'. But they eventually emerged as the couple's strongest supporters. The smiles on people's faces when they succeed in gaining recognition and rights is Shruti's best reward.

"Passion and commitment are ways to overcome short-term obstacles and long-term challenges in life," she says, adding that courage, patience, and continuous non-violent resistance have become part of her life now. Shruti emphasizes that passion and commitment are key to overcoming obstacles, both short-term and long-term. Courage, patience, and continuous non-violent resistance are now integral to her life's philosophy. Her story is an inspiring tale of transcending societal barriers and dedicating one's life to the pursuit of equality and justice for the most vulnerable segments of society.

हम हैं सकारात्मकता
I am Positivity

URMILA DEVI

*GOLA BLOCK,
JHARKHAND*

“When one woman
breaks free from her
chains, it creates a
ripple effect.”







Urmila Devi's regular attendance at the local Self-Help Group meetings at Sangrampur Panchayat in Gola Block in Jharkhand was an act of courage as her husband fiercely opposed her going there. She remained resolute in the face of opposition. She had no idea that her actions were being closely watched by other women who took inspiration from her, and that they would sow the seeds of a movement that called for women to break free of the shackles of gender-based discrimination and find their own voices.

Urmila Devi's journey was not easy. She had to bear the burden of all the tasks women have to take on: caring for livestock, household chores,

Previous page: Urmila Devi of Sarla Khurd village conducts gender-based trainings with women to address issues like domestic violence and discrimination.

This page: Urmila photographed with the women of her community.

Page on right: Urmila interacting with fellow village women, including conducting gender based trainings with local women.

Next page: Urmila laughs at a joke shared by a local women.





everyone's demands, and to top all that, constant humiliation and insults. She remained steadfast and continued to participate in cluster meetings in Gola and Deoghar, which were facilitated by the non-profit, Pradan. For six years Urmila worked as a volunteer, helping to mobilize and train hundreds of women from her Panchayat in modern agricultural techniques like multi-layer farming and mixed cropping. She also worked to provide emotional support to women. "Once, in a case of dowry harassment where the woman was set on fire by her husband," says Urmila, "I worked with Kalyani Mahila Sangh (KMS), the block-level women's federation, to fight for justice for her. Our protests led to the culprit being convicted of the crime."

Urmila's confidence and dedication drew attention and in 2016 she became a board member of KMS, going on to become its President two years later. In her work as President, she drew on the networks she had helped build through her earlier work, and challenged prevailing norms that discriminated against women. Her focus was on gender,

health and sanitation – she believes that attention to these empowers women to become aware and speak up about gender-based violence. Today Urmila inspires and leads other women to participate in SHGs and to take control of their lives. In addition, she's worked with women to promote safe drinking water and sanitation, encouraging 400 women to invest in water filters and toilets through SHG loans.

Urmila Devi dreams of a world free of violence and to this end, she has established Gender Justice Centres at both Panchayat and block levels, they offer counselling, legal guidance and support to survivors. Urmila Devi's story is one of transformative leadership, demonstrating the power of grassroots mobilization in empowering women and challenging deeply entrenched societal norms. Her relentless pursuit of justice and equality for women in Jharkhand serves as an inspiring example of the impact one individual can have in fostering significant social change.

I am a Mobilizer





VINEETHA VERMA

*LUCKNOW,
UTTAR PRADESH*

“It’s only when we become self-dependent that this society will move. That’s my goal.”



"There are 10 women in our family, but 100 in our community. If I had listened to the 10, then, perhaps, the 100 who are employed today, who got a chance to move forward in their lives, wouldn't have been able to."

Meet Vineeta Verma, who lost her husband, the village pradhan, nine days after the birth of their first child. The marriage was only four years old when the tragedy struck. If Vineeta had listened to the 10 women she would probably still have been within the four walls of their home. Instead, she decided to pick up the mantle and move ahead. "I want to fulfil my husband's dreams," said Vineeta as she decided to move into local politics and became the village pradhan.

Previous page: Unmukt Changemaker and Pradhan, Vineeta Verma, President of the Chanda Sankul Sangh.

This page: Workers gathering processing scented incense sticks into bundles.

Page on right: Vineeta Varma conducting a quality check on the final production of incense sticks by women workers of the SHG group. Vineeta and the SHG group workers examine dried flowers collected from nearby temples, which are then processed into incense sticks and other products.

Next page: Vineeta Verma, flanked by women members of the Chanda Sankul Sangh.





There was opposition, mainly from her husband's family, but Vineeta stood firm and remained in politics even though she had to move back to her parents' home. "I simply did not have the bandwidth to listen to all those telling me what I should not do." She is determined to work to improve the lives of her community such that even the most marginalized women have a chance to make something of their lives.

As she says, "Today, every woman here can go out, talk to someone, go to the bank. I have around 70 women working with me. This is a big change for me." Recently, Vineeta initiated a groundbreaking project focused on solar panels which has opened up opportunities for even more women, empowering them, and protecting the environment in one go. Her next goal is to stand for elections again and take her husband's dream further.

Vineeta feels all women must "work with self-respect and self-dependence, it may be the biggest challenge you face in life, but it is worth it. "I think it's only when we become self-dependent that this society will move. That's my goal."

Vineeta Verma's story is a testament to resilience, leadership, and the power of women in transforming societies. Her commitment to empowering women, fostering self-dependence, and driving positive change in her community serves as an inspiration, particularly in challenging traditional gender norms and advocating for women's active participation in local governance and community development.

हम हैं सुदृढ
I am Strong





AUDA VIEGAS

MARGAO, SOUTH GOA

“Education is not just book knowledge, but an all-round development of the personality and one’s moral compass.”



Her empathetic approach and commitment to serving others and her focus on addressing the needs and challenges within her local community is ultimately about turning personal trials into communal triumphs, serving with empathy, and nurturing a community where every individual can find their voice and strength.

"Women today need to take their lives seriously, and prepare themselves to confront obstacles, and develop self-respect and dignity," says Auda Viegas. One rainy morning, Auda Viegas was walking aimlessly on a beach in her home state of Goa. "I was going through a personal trauma. Tears were running down my cheeks, merging

Previous page: Auda Viegas speaks to the Vanarmare tribe about gender equality.

This page: Auda Viegas set up Bailancho Ekvott, an organization dedicated to acknowledging women's roles as caregivers in their families, particularly for the elderly.

Page on right: A medical assistant of Bailancho Ekvott talks to teenage girls of the Vanarmare tribe about safe sex. Bailancho Ekvott's volunteers performing a play about child abuse and domestic violence. Sakhi One Stop Centre's support meeting, discussing violence against women and children in the region.

Next page: A food and clothes distribution initiative by Bailancho Ekvott.





with the rain. I was confused and deeply disturbed,” she says. “Suddenly I found a shell, shaped like Ganpati (Ganesha – the elephant god). I felt like this was a sign for me to get myself together and do something meaningful.”

Auda gave up her teaching job, and set up Bailancho Ekvott, an organization dedicated to acknowledging women’s roles as caregivers in their families, particularly for the elderly. The organization also began to advocate for the rights of children, and for equal inheritance and custody rights.

Soon, Auda identified another need: to prepare women to deal with rising instances of gender-based violence. The organization set up a helpline for women in distress, created a safe place where women could meet and talk, and began to offer pro bono legal assistance to survivors of physical and mental violence. Soon they added rescue assistance to their list of services and also set up partnerships with other organizations doing similar work.

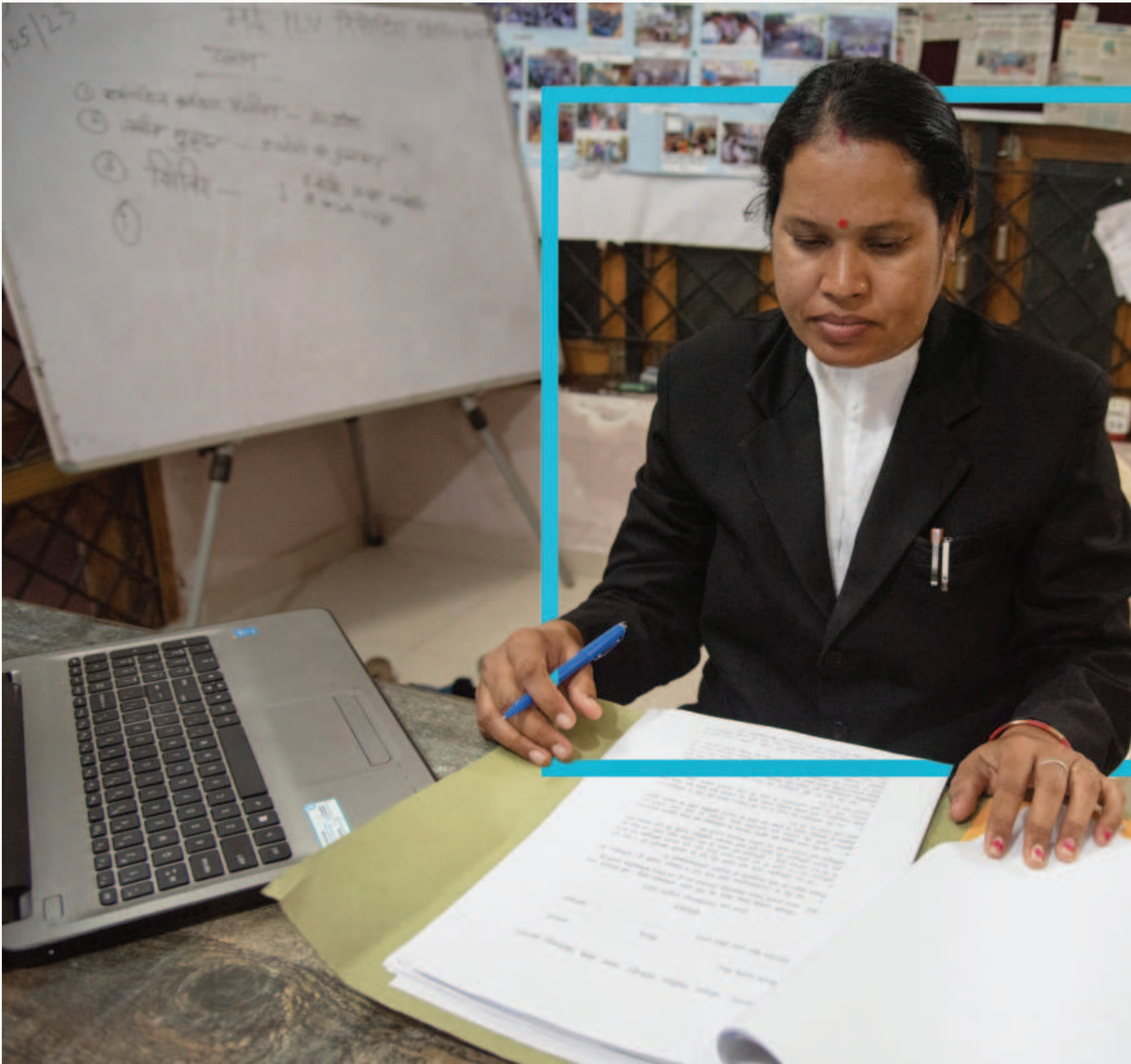
None of this was easy. “When women come to our shelter home, at first they are very anxious and depressed, but slowly they begin to settle,” Auda says. “The process of settling requires constant support and empathy.” And this became her personal mission.

There were other hurdles, too. Auda barely had any resources. She used her car as the ‘official’ rescue vehicle for survivors, her home as an office and a safe space for women to gather and talk. These moves were not popular, she was criticized. “I make more enemies than friends because men who mistreat women are usually vicious,” she says.

But she persevered, and today she works with the government’s One Stop Centre initiative. Auda has another love: Goan folk culture, and she is determined to make it more visible and relevant. For over three decades now, Auda’s home has been a vibrant hub for Goan heritage, filled with the creations of local women. Auda works across different communities to highlight their specific heritage. For her, this is a part of a wider educational project. “To me, education is not just book knowledge, but an all-round development of the personality and one’s moral compass,” says the former teacher.

From a solitary figure on a beach to a leader who has created a supportive and empowering community, her story is an example of how personal experiences can fuel a passion for community service and social change.

हम हैं सिद्धांतवादी
I am Principled





GAYATRI SUMAN

BILASPUR, CHHATTISGARH

“The Constitution has given us the tools to challenge established power structures – we need to invest in community leadership so they can access these tools and address their challenges.”



Before Gayatri became a lawyer and began to fight for people's rights, she worked with social welfare organizations and NGOs, helping women set up bank linkages and enabling them to find work. As a practicing lawyer, she began championing cases related to land rights, gender equality, and social justice.

“It was when I met with different communities while working with the NGO that I realized how little people knew about the law.” Keeping the focus on working with communities, Gayatri founded the Kanooni Margdarshan Kendra, a law centre that provides legal services to the marginalized. “Through the centre, we’ve managed to get convictions in critical cases, including high-profile custodial

Previous page: Gayatri Suman at her office in Bilaspur.

Page on right: Gayatri Suman at her community law center, Kanooni Margdarshan Kendra, addressing a community meeting.

Next page: Gayatri Suman sensitizes minority and marginalized communities on the legal interventions available to them. Gayatri was greatly inspired by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.





torture incidents and cases related to caste atrocities and sexual violence.” Apart from taking up cases, Gayatri also works on systemic policy interventions, including issues like domestic violence, labour rights, Dalit rights, and witch-hunting.

“The kendra doesn’t only fight cases, it also trains young lawyers and paralegals in social justice advocacy. We believe that investing in community leadership is the cornerstone of such work.”

It’s been over 20 years now that Gayatri has been working as a lawyer. Her journey has not been free of challenges and she has faced considerable opposition from the powers that be. Despite this, she remains committed to using the law to challenge established power structures. As Gayatri says, “Our work represents a direct affront to established power structures, and is thus often met with opposition. My vision

is to use the law to challenge these power structures. I firmly believe that the only way to address these challenges is by investing in community leadership.”

Gayatri Suman’s leadership style can be best described as a blend of advocacy and empowering leadership. Her approach involves not only fighting for justice through the legal system but also empowering others, particularly young legal professionals and community members, to understand and engage with the law. She stands as a testament to the power of legal expertise combined with grassroots community engagement in driving systemic change. Her vision of using the law to challenge entrenched power dynamics, and her firm belief in community leadership, make her a remarkable leader in the realm of social justice and legal empowerment.

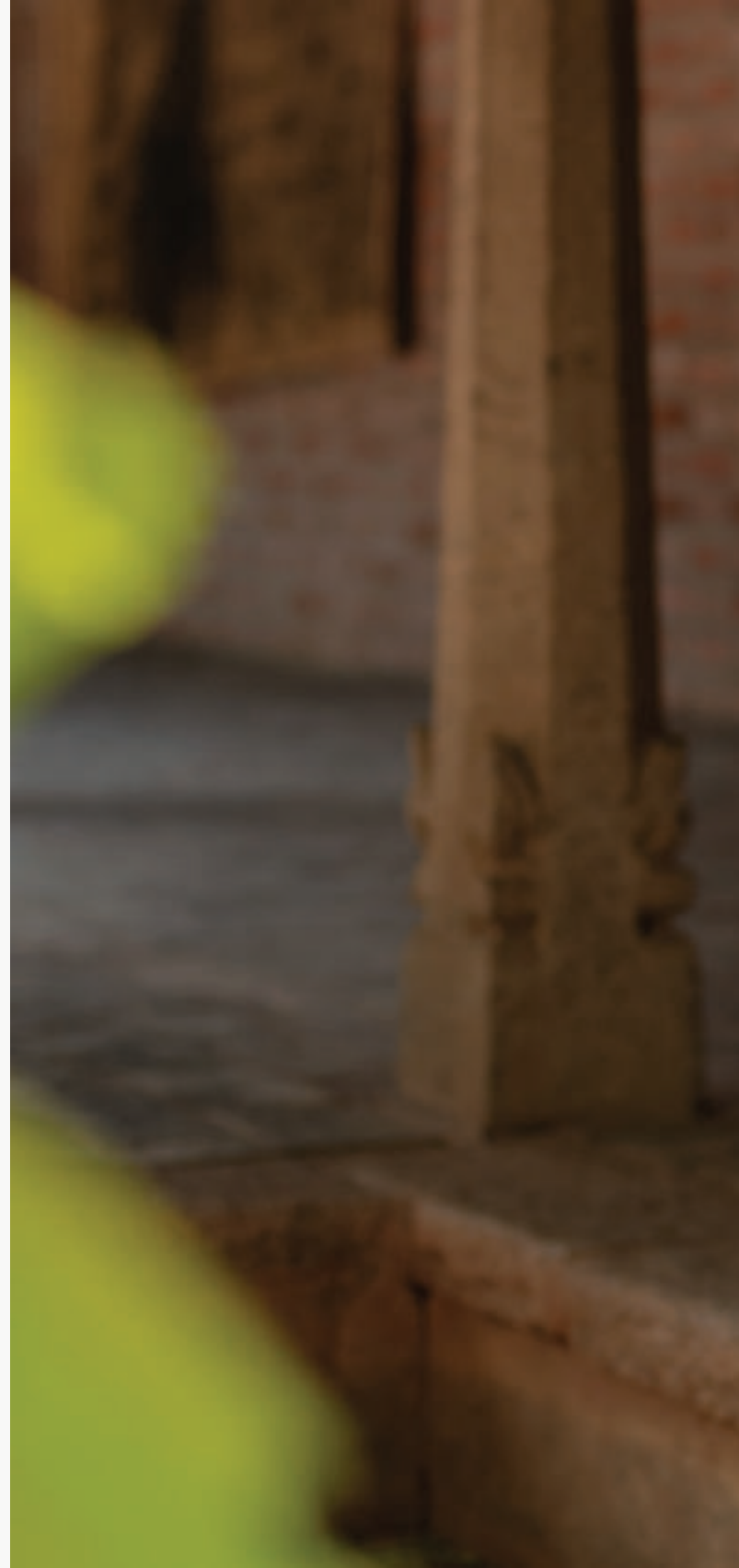
हम हैं कर्मशील
I am Hardworking

GRACE BANU

THOOTHUKUDI, TAMIL
NADU

“என் சுமை இரு மடங்கு
அதிகமாகவும் போராட்டம்
இரு மடங்கு கடினமாகவும்
இருக்கிறதே தவிர
வேறொன்றுமில்லை.”

*“My burden is twice as heavy, and my struggle twice
as hard.”*







As an 11-year-old Dalit girl growing up in a conservative small town, the minute Grace Banu asserted her gender and expressed her identity, she was thrown out of school and sent to a mental asylum, ostracized even by her family.

The only avenue open to her was to leave town and start life afresh with a new identity in the trans community. “Overcoming adversity with positivity is in my Dalit identity, it’s a legacy passed down by my forefathers like Babasaheb Ambedkar.” Drawing on her identity and this legacy, she finished school and went on to study engineering and become a software engineer. Today she heads an organization called the Trans Rights Now Collective, which she founded in 2013.

Previous page: Grace Banu is the founder of the Trans Rights Now Collective.

This page: Grace Banu hugs a member of her collective.

Page on right: Snapshots of a Trans Rights Now Collective conference. Dee Dee, the moderator of the conference. Santa Khurai, a transgender rights activist and writer from Manipur.

Next page: Grace Banu at the conference.





That was only the first of Grace's many achievements. "I create role models all over the country," she says, referring to herself as the first trans engineer in India, and ticks off the list of firsts she has inspired: the first transgender sub-inspector of police, the first transgender medical student, nursing professional, government sector employee, and the list goes on.

She acknowledges her debts too: "The feminist movement, the human rights movement, and the Dalit movement paved the way for the trans rights movement and gave us the fuel we needed."

Grace set up the Trans Rights Now Collective to create role models for trans persons. Achievements apart, Grace was also acutely aware of the multiple layers of marginalization of both caste and gender that she had to confront – at work, for example, she faced consistent transphobia and discrimination. "The right to education," she says, "changed everything for my community. Sex work is no longer our only employment option." Her battle is now focused on representation and reservations for trans people everywhere.

Her determination has also led to another change. Tamil Nadu, her home state, was the first to set up a transgender welfare board and offer education, employment, and voting rights to the trans community; thus far, 153 trans people have taken the Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission exam. This trend is now spreading to the neighboring states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Not content with just these neighboring states, Grace has taken her battle to the national level, and is pushing for inclusivity all round. The Trans Rights Now Collective straddles many generations, castes, and classes. What started as a micro community of a few members has today grown to 700 and counting.

Grace not only confronts discrimination head-on but also builds pathways for empowerment and inclusion. Her leadership style is a blend of advocacy, transformation, and community-building, making her a true trailblazer in the fight for transgender rights and equality. "It's time to let us into the mainstream," she asserts, a clarion call that resonates with the power of her transformative leadership.

I am a **Binary-breaker**

JAMEELA NISHAT

HYDERBAD, TELANGANA

“Not just our daughters, we need to raise our sons differently too—the world needs people who are empathetic.”







In the city of Hyderabad, Shaheen (the name symbolizes freedom and self-soaring aspiration), an organization founded by Jameela Nishat, is known as the voice of communal harmony. Local people see Shaheen as an indomitable force that fights the patriarchal ills foisted on women of all faiths in the name of tradition, ethnicity, or power. The women of Shaheen have prevented scores of child marriages, trafficking, and domestic violence cases.

Set up in 2002 by Jameela Nishat, Shaheen Women's Resource and Welfare Association is a place of solace and support for all those birds whose wings were clipped even before they learned to fly. A poet-activist, Jameela was born in a well-off, progressive, and educated Muslim family that moved to

Previous page: Jameela Nishat is the founder of Shaheen Women's Resource and Welfare Association.

This page: Safety mapping exercise with the community.

Page on right: Women practice self-defense skills. Safety maps being discussed at the Moghalpura police station. Surveillance camera to ensure the safety of women.

Next page: Jameela Nishat set up the Shaheen Women's Resource and Welfare Association in 2002 to ensure safety for women in the Old City of Hyderabad and improve their quality of life.





Hyderabad after the communal violence of 1992. Shaheen, a place of peace, was Jameela's response to the violence she had seen, and also to the rampant gender-based violence that existed within her own community and others.

Shaheen workers had seen how poverty—and sometimes greed—drove people to sell off their underaged daughters for one-night or one-month nikahs (marriages) to geriatric Arabs. Tipped off by her local supporters, Jameela would often show up with the authorities in tow, and in this way she rescued hundreds of underaged brides, sometimes literally before the vows were taken. Not the sort of woman to be deterred by a fatwah, death threats, FIRs, or court cases, Jameela's fearless and relentless fight against local patriarchal practices eventually won the respect and support of local law enforcement and child welfare officers.

Today, Shaheen stands strong and proud as the face of secular reform and as a testimony to the change that collaboration can bring about in a community. It is a platform through which marginalized women from any community can break through their traditional barriers and gain control over their socio-economic rights. The team works hard to advocate for women's rights, through brave and unusual means such as the Sufi qawwali, which thus far has been the domain of male performers.

Community fairs or melas are held regularly to familiarize women with their rights. Domestic violence in the area had dropped considerably, though not completely. And violence is being reported, now that women are well-versed with their rights. Many women who seek help from Shaheen return to work for the organization. Jameela says, "Our girls are now in big places, in banks, corporations and even government offices."

Jameela has been felicitated by the government, the public, women's rights organizations and writers' guilds for her work in Shaheen. Jameela Nishat's journey with Shaheen continues to inspire and empower, mirroring her belief in the strength and potential of every woman. Through her work with Shaheen, Jameela has not only created a safe haven for oppressed women, but has also fostered a transformative environment where they can realize their potential and assert their rights.

Her leadership transcends beyond achieving organizational goals; it's about nurturing the individual potential of each woman and fostering collective empowerment. Jameela Nishat's story is a testament to the profound impact of transformational leadership on creating sustainable change and building resilient communities.

شاین
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I am a Royal Hawk

PALAKH KHANNA

NEW DELHI

“When we talk to the
youth, we impact the
future.”







One day, at home, Palakh Khanna saw her domestic help hesitate to ask her mother for a sanitary napkin. This incident changed Palakh's life. Why was it taboo to talk about menstruation? She began to think of all the subjects that were 'taboo' and unmentionable.

Her organization breaks the ice and makes space for dialogue around the taboos that make people uncomfortable, and that they do not want to talk about. Break The Ice raises awareness about mental health, menstruation, gender equality, and climate change amongst young people.

Twenty-year-old Palakh Khanna is a driven student and a young changemaker pursuing her Bachelor's

Previous page: Palakh Khanna.

This page: Palakh Khanna at a Break The Ice meetup in Delhi.

Page on right: A participant photographed during a session in Delhi. The team sparked conversations by distributing chits around various taboos at an event in Delhi. A participant expressing her thoughts and opinions at a Break The Ice event.

Next page: Palakh Khanna engaging in a discussion with participants.





degree from Gargi College, Delhi University. Her passion fuels her to step up, step out of her comfort zone, and overcome her introverted nature to make real, measurable change.

Once in a school, among groups of children aged nine to 13, Palakh and her team led a session on menstruation. The school found that the session had a positive impact and enabled young people to talk freely about menstruation.

Today, the once shy Palakh has delivered several talks on menstruation, the environment, and other topics, and

has over 83,000 followers on LinkedIn. She has initiated conversations amongst over 25,000 individuals, breaking one taboo at a time. Her youth-led organization with 90+ changemakers in across 10+ countries works on three fronts: awareness, action, and community.

Palakh, who works passionately on sustainability and youth action as well, says, “When we talk to the youth, we impact the future. My goal,” she adds, “is to create a safe global space for young people.” Her commitment is to breaking societal barriers and empowering young people to reshape dialogues and attitudes for future generations.

I am **Uninhibited**





POORNIMA SUKUMAR

BENGALURU, KARNATAKA

“The murals they paint are visual conversations between the trans women and the public.”



Art has the ability to build bridges, start conversations, and invite inclusion. This is the bedrock on which the Aravani Art Project was founded by Poornima Sukumar in 2016. Named after the Aravani festival, where thousands of trans individuals celebrate communion with Lord Aravan, this art collective is a for-profit organization that enables trans artists to find work that allows them to live with dignity. Started as an experiment to enable the integration of the trans community into mainstream society, today the project spans 40 artists across four cities, with art commissions coming in from across the subcontinent, from Ladakh to Sri Lanka. It has given the community a platform for expression, a respectable vocation, a chance to live with dignity

Previous page: Artists getting a routine medical check at the Aravani Art Project space in Bengaluru.

This page: Nandini Rajaramanathan and Poornima Sukumar working on a commissioned art piece at the Aravani Art Project space in Bengaluru.

Page on right: Purushi working on an art piece at the Aravani Art Project space in Bengaluru. A still from a workshop. Shanthi Muniswamy and Shwetha during a conversation.

Next page: The Aravani Art Project team.





and, most of all, serves as a bridge through which the cis community can understand the world beyond their binary.

In 2013, a work project with an international TV crew took Poornima to the Aravani festival held at the Koothandavar Temple in South India, which became a defining moment in her life. The sheer glory of this celebration by the trans community, who lived silently on the fringes of society and emerged in full strength just once a year to celebrate their truth, left an indelible mark on her. Wanting to initiate some form of crossover for them to connect with the mainstream, she invited a few transwomen to join her as she painted a public wall, watched by intrigued bystanders.

The wall drew media attention, and from it was born the Aravani Art Project: started by a cis-woman artist to create awareness about the trans community and facilitate their acceptance and integration into society. The for-profit organization is hired by individuals, governments, and corporations to paint murals in public places. Aravani Art Project murals can be seen across Indian cities, and in corporate offices. Their wall mural in Mumbai's Dharavi district and the Love Grove Flyover in Worli have become local landmarks. Poornima works with the more reclusive members, training them to use art to express their untold stories on walls such as these. Working together sparks organic conversations, with each other and with onlookers. "Handing them a mike and turning on the spotlight isn't

the most sensitive or productive way of getting to know any community, let alone one that has lived on the outskirts of society for generations," says Poornima.

Since she works exclusively with trans colleagues, Poornima is constantly fighting the guilt that comes from privilege, a heavy burden to carry. And while the mural project is a start, it isn't enough to sustain the community and give them a reliable source of income. "It doesn't help that having no experience of the commercial world, they don't understand money or taxes," Poornima says. She is currently evaluating the possibility of expanding the Aravani Art Project into the restaurant business.

Poornima's leadership style is inclusive and empathetic, focusing on empowering marginalized communities through creative expression. Poornima emphasizes the importance of mutual acceptance and sharing spaces between cis and trans communities. She advocates for self-reflection, shared leadership, and persistence in the face of challenges. Her journey with the Aravani Art Project is a testament to the transformative power of art in fostering understanding, acceptance, and inclusivity. Her commitment to the cause and innovative approach in using art as a medium for social change shows how creativity and empathy can unite diverse worlds.

हम हैं **தீர்கதர்சி**
I am a Visionary





PRAGYA SIKKA

GURUGRAM, HARYANA

“Be an ally to the
women around you.”



Pragya Sikka's life turned upside down after she was assaulted by a batchmate in college. "Initially," she says, "I found it impossible to speak about what had happened. It is so strange how society has conditioned us to believe it is our fault as victim-survivors. That you could be a victim of a crime, but it would still be your fault. That there I was— numb and lifeless, feeling guilty for some reason – while my perpetrator was living their life as usual. I don't say, "I was assaulted by a friend" anymore. I changed the narrative to: a man, who I thought was a friend, assaulted me. That person was a predator—and he made a very conscious choice, violating a person. Taking away this power from the perpetrator, and changing the narrative – this was the turning point for me."

Previous page: Pragya Sikka promoting her campaign #MakeCampusesSafer.

This page: Pragya Sikka alongside a member from her community.

Page on right: Still from a community session hosted by Pragya. Pragya Sikka working on her book which talks about the lived experiences of sexual assault survivors. Still from a community sharing space for survivors of gender-based violence and their allies that uses different art forms.

Next page: Pragya Sikka.





Pragya now began to carve a path for herself, and for many others. She decided to dedicate herself to bringing about systemic change and an end to gender-based violence in colleges and universities across India. She knew the path wouldn't be easy, but she also knew it was one she had chosen.

The process involved a great deal of learning and Pragya took this on as a key task. A number of fellowships she was awarded helped. These included the Azad Leadership Program run by the Azad Project, the She Creates Change program run by Change.org and the Gender fellowship run by the Himachal Queer Foundation.

Pragya now holds legal awareness workshops, in which they utilize the art of storytelling to encourage people from marginalized identities to speak up against gender-based violence and fight for social justice. The sessions have been very impactful and students across the board have learnt how to recognize and identify harassment and to seek immediate help.

Apart from story-telling, Pragya found meaning in art, "After I was assaulted, there was a tornado of emotions I used to experience—and that overwhelming storm, that rage, that grief—there didn't exist a vocabulary that could explain it. Every time I tried to talk, nothing came out of my mouth. There was no language. The world changes for assault survivors. But how could I explain this in words? So I started drawing all of this in my little sketchbook. For

months, these drawings were only with me. I drew myself as Toto, a genderless stick figure.

Over time, I shared these drawings with my close friends. All of them could see themselves in Toto. They spoke about things to me that they had never shared with anybody. I knew Toto was not just me. This isn't just my story."

Pragya now runs her non-profit Friends of Toto, which uses art and storytelling to talk about gender based violence and social justice.

Recently Pragya released a book of stories of survivors of assault and violence. She says, "I spoke with over 75 survivors-victims-fighters, who shared how the trauma of being assaulted affects them, and the different shapes and sizes it takes. A lot of them verbalized it for the first time in their lives. I put all of it in this book because I want every survivor-victim-fighter-human to be seen and heard."

Pragya's leadership style is characterized by empathetic and transformational leadership. Her experiences have not only shaped her understanding and approach to activism but have also infused her leadership with deep empathy and a commitment to change. By combining her activism with art, Pragya has created a unique and powerful platform for healing, awareness, and advocacy.

I am an **Artivist**





RASIKA SUNDARAM

*CHENNAI,
TAMIL NADU*

“The phrase, ‘அன்பே சிவம்’ (Anbe Sivam) serves as a guiding principle for my endeavors. It translates to ‘Love is God’.”



Rasika Sundaram moved from Canada to India with her family when she was eight. Even at that age, Rasika was very alert to the stark social disparities she saw in India. The condition of the poor broke her heart. Learning from her father, who taught her the value of empathy and the importance of taking action, Rasika turned towards community-centric and people-focused work.

She began by trying to understand human behaviour and the issues plaguing society. "This led me to looking at human rights abuses, and the root cause of trauma, rather than only its aftermath."

As a survivor of sexual violence herself, Rasika was well placed to understand how deep trauma lay in human beings. In 2022, she kickstarted a project called

Previous page: Rasika Sundaram is the founder of the Imaara Survivor Support Foundation.

This page: The foundation has come up with educational booklets to recognize and tackle gender violence.

Page on right: Booklets getting distributed. Woman seeking advice after a group session held at a local park. Rasika initiating a conversation with the women in her locality.

Next page: Rasika conducts an awareness session on recognizing the forms of violence that persist in societies.





the Neeti Project (now named the Imaara Survivor Support Foundation) to support survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, and to advocate for transformative justice and community engagement. "I firmly believe that there has to be a two-way engagement between the survivors and the community," she says, adding, "We need to prevent violence. And one way to do that is to educate the community, and especially perpetrators, on why they shouldn't be indulging in violence in the first place." Initially, Rasika's family wasn't too convinced of the path she had chosen, but her passion and involvement brought them round, and "they became my biggest cheerleaders. Despite receiving encouragement to pursue the work I've chosen, I faced opposition from those uncomfortable with my public identification as a survivor of violence. Also, because of my gender, some feared this disclosure could negatively impact my reputation and prospects, particularly in terms of marriage. This sentiment underscores the very misconception I seek to challenge. Shame and concealment should not fall upon survivors, but rather it is the perpetrators who must be held accountable for their actions and undergo a transformation in their mindset and behavior."

The challenges Rasika has faced haven't deterred her. If anything, they have made her more determined to continue. Being a survivor of violence herself, her work can be triggering at times, but she's attempting to find ways to navigate that. And she's doing this by bringing compassion and kindness to her work. "I believe that every person possesses the power to make a positive impact, and this can be done by bringing love and kindness to your work. I look forward to a future when survivors can access the help they need without financial barriers, and where therapy, dance, music, and art all play crucial roles in healing."

Rasika's leadership style is both compassionate and transformative. Her personal experiences have shaped her into a powerful advocate for survivors, and her approach to activism is grounded in empathy, kindness, and a deep commitment to fostering change. Through the Imaara Survivor Support Foundation, Rasika is not only providing crucial support to those in need but is also working towards a more informed, empathetic, and supportive society.

हम हैं वलिम
I am Strength





RITUPARNA NEOG

DIBRUGARH, ASSAM

“If one does not understand the language of love, one cannot be free from the cycle of religion and caste. The language of love is not the superficial language of sweetness but of intersectionality and equality.”



As a child, Rituparna found solace in words, and stories – she found acceptance in books.

“I was bullied as a child,” the Assam-based queer rights activist and storyteller says. “And I found my safe space in libraries.”

Her own experiences taught her about the transformative power of safe spaces. Now 29, she channels these lessons into tireless activism, transforming ordinary spaces into vibrant hubs of inclusivity.

She founded the Akam Foundation, aiming to promote gender equality and education across Assam and Northeast India, and the Chandraprabha Saikiani Feminist Library and Resource Centre

Previous page: Rituparna Neog is the founder and director of Akam Foundation.

This page: The badge of Free Libraries For All.

Page on right: Rituparna Neog conducts a workshop on gender and sexuality awareness. A look at Rituparna’s collection of books.

Next page: Rituparna Neog actively mobilizes the queer community in Assam, with a focus on rural areas and small towns, working towards making spaces gender neutral.





in Dibrugarh, which stands as a symbol of her journey—from seeking safety in libraries as a bullied child to creating a space for feminist research and action, reinforcing the idea that the right to safe spaces is indeed a basic human right.

Rituparna also actively mobilizes the queer community in Assam, with a focus on rural areas and small towns, working towards making spaces gender neutral. And it is in her work with rural communities all over the Northeast that Rituparna “found great acceptance from other women.”

“I have learnt the value of love and empathy from them,” she says.

She is also deeply inspired by the younger generation of queer and trans rights activists. Their resilience and eloquence inspire her, and reinforce her commitment to creating inclusive and supportive spaces. Rituparna founded the #NoMoreHoldingMyPee campaign when she found that her washroom experience is replicated in every

trans person’s experience. In a Change.org petition in 2022, Rituparna wrote, “Have you had to hold your pee, because using the assigned toilet makes you uncomfortable?”

The campaign rests on the simple belief that implementing gender-neutral restrooms doesn’t demand major infrastructure changes but a shift in mindset. At the heart of Rituparna’s activism is her unwavering belief in the power of love to break the cycle of discrimination. She asserts that the language of love embodies intersectionality, equality, and acceptance, principles that are fundamental to her advocacy work.

Rituparna’s leadership style is characterized by empathetic and transformative activism. She combines personal experiences with proactive social initiatives, creating a ripple effect of change and inclusivity.

हम हैं परिवर्तन
I am Change

SADHANA MISHRA

BHUBANESHWAR, ODISHA

“If I am able to change the perception I have about myself, that change will reach my family and eventually the country.”







"Whenever I would wear a bindi and my mother's dupatta, the mirror would tell me that I am very beautiful. My mother told me that my name is Satya Sundar and I thought that I will always speak satya, truth, and about being beautiful, the mirror gave me the answer."

Sadhana Mishra, born in 1984, struggled with her gender identity since childhood, and as a child even held in her pee to avoid looking at her own genitals. In her childhood, she spent most of her time with women and her elder sister, since her brothers didn't appreciate her feminine gestures. During her early years, Sadhana endured relentless bullying and harassment because she didn't conform to society's rigid gender norms. In 2015, after undergoing gender confirming surgery, she found self-acceptance and began a new journey.

A trans activist from Odisha, Sadhana's commitment extends beyond administrative circles to actively engage with the transgender community. Despite her family's orthodox Brahmin traditions, including untouchability practices, Sadhana's motivation was to work with people from diverse

backgrounds. This drove her to pursue a Master's degree in social work.

Sadhana is the founder of SAKHA, a community-based organization. She vividly remembers its challenging early years. During the first three or four years of its founding, the focus was on establishing a strong foundation for SAKHA within the community, with the vision that it was a collective effort, not just her own. Securing an office space was a constant struggle, often leading them to work in parks and other public areas due to the difficulty of finding a suitable rented location. Neighbors would not welcome them as tenants.

Sadhana, while collaborating with NGOs, noticed society's unfair bias against transgender people. Limited job options pushed many into sex work or begging. To challenge these stereotypes, Sadhana stepped up. A notable project under her initiative called 'Nua Maa' (New Mother) operated in a remote tribal area. 60 transgender individuals worked for 1,000 days, providing essential services such as nutritional

Previous page: Sadhana Mishra is a trans activist from Odisha.

Page on left: Standing in front of the mirror, Sadhana recalls how whenever she wears a bindi, the mirror compliments her.

Next page: Sadhana at the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences. Sadhana with SAKHA members and later with school children.





support and assistance to pregnant women and their children. This was an unconventional approach, and the project played a crucial role in breaking down biases and stigma against transgender individuals. The project, supported by SAKHA, showcased trans folks' significant societal contributions, changing perceptions for the better.

Sadhana's leadership style is a blend of transformative and inclusive leadership. She transforms personal struggles into community empowerment, leading by example to challenge and change societal perceptions. Her approach is inclusive, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds and focusing on collective effort rather than individual achievement. Sadhana's work is guided by a deep belief in the power of self-change: "If I am able to change the perception I have about myself, that change will reach my family and eventually the country."

Sadhana Mishra stands as a testament to the power of embracing one's truth and the profound impact of leading with empathy, resilience, and inclusivity.

हम हैं बदलाव

I am Change





SWATI SINGH

VARANASI,
UTTAR PRADESH

“संगठित महिलाएँ ना कभी
हारती है, और ना कभी
हारेंगी।”

*“Women who are united have never lost, and
will never lose.”*



Swati's journey as a development professional and a feminist activist is deeply rooted in her own gendered experiences. Growing up in an environment where women's mobility and educational opportunities were restricted, Swati had to contend with studying in the only nearby Hindi medium school. Her aspirations for further education were met with discrimination from both teachers and family, compelling her to complete her schooling at home.

Motivated by the societal impact of the Nirbhaya rape case, Swati pursued sociology and later journalism. Her goal was to understand the patriarchal structures of society and acquire

Previous page: Swati Singh interacts with young people from the Musahar community.

This page: At the Sui Dhaga Centre, a skill based education programme for rural women and girls to fight back the economic crisis, Swati Singh interacts with young girls from the Musahar community.

Page on right: A snapshot of the products made by students of the Sui Dhaga Centre.

Next page: Swati Singh's journey as a development professional and a feminist activist is deeply rooted in her own gendered experiences.





the skills to articulate the everyday experiences of women effectively. This led her to start writing blog posts about women's lives, successfully building a community of over one lakh readers.

Swati's commitment to empowering women extended beyond blogging. Recognizing the need for comprehensive education about menstruation and bodily autonomy, she began working with women in her community. However, she realized that mere awareness was insufficient. To truly challenge the status quo, young women needed essential skills like communication and leadership. This realization shaped Swati's subsequent work, which focused on equipping young women with these critical skills. "History teaches us that every time women have organized themselves in a collective and demanded something, they have always won. If our solidarity is strong, we can never be defeated," she says.

She founded Muheem, a non-governmental and non-political organization headquartered in Varanasi, which is dedicated to championing the rights of women, girls and young people. The organization is steadfastly committed to facilitating the mainstream integration of underprivileged communities through various initiatives focused on education, skill development, and the cultivation of feminist

leadership at the grassroots level, including the Sui Dhaga program, which aims to develop a learning space for under-resourced women from excluded communities. It's a skill-based education programme for rural women and girls to fight back the economic crisis.

Her path has not been without challenges. As she began running her organization, she faced backlash due to her caste status. Contrary to the stereotypical image of a social worker from a higher caste and a big city, Swati faced skepticism and discrimination. Yet, she remained undeterred, continuing her mission to educate and empower women. "I firmly believe that to truly uplift a marginalized section of society, we need to let them lead the way."

Swati identifies as a feminist—a testament to her commitment to viewing and addressing social issues through a feminist lens. Her work symbolizes a fight against deeply-ingrained patriarchal norms and casteism, and she strives to create a society where women, irrespective of their backgrounds, can assert their rights and lead. Through education and leadership training, she is not only transforming individual lives but also paving the way for a more equitable and just society.

हम हैं नारीवादी

I am a Feminist





KUMARI GIRLS

BOKARO, JHARKHAND

“Shortage of electricity is a big issue in our village that impacts students a great deal.”



In May of 2021, Cyclone Yaas brought devastation to Odisha and West Bengal. In Dantoo, a village in Jharkhand, 18-year-old high school students, Dipika, Priti, Rani, Aparna, Usha, and Puja found themselves thinking of innovative ways to illuminate lives in dark times. They were well placed to do this.

They underwent extensive training as solar panel installation technicians, which falls under the electronics and hardware trade, to promote solar energy. They also started to manufacture and repair LED bulbs, and studied electrical repairing skills via a Vocational Training Programme.

Previous page: (from left) Rani Kumari, Usha Kumari, Aparna Kumari, Puja Kumari, Dipika Kumari, and Priti Kumari photographed with their solar device.

This page: Dantoo village women using solar devices for group mobile learning during meetings.

Page on right: Young women are being trained to make and repair LED bulbs and solar devices. Usha Kumari, Puja Kumari, and Priti Kumari captured during a teaching session.

Next page: Still from a testing session.





“We also gave ourselves a name, the Tech Giants!” They’d begun thinking about electricity cuts during the pandemic, when students had to miss many classes because of erratic supply. “We got together and created a device that runs on solar energy. That way, we felt we could address the problem of poor electricity supply.”

The device can charge a mobile through solar power; it enables people to stay connected and the speakers help in listening to music and news. The young leaders—with their scientific charts, prototypes, and failed and successful attempts—studied the available data to understand what to do. They found that their district had close to 300 days of sunlight a year. Given that coal is limited, they turned to solar energy to create their devices. This device, designed for the Disaster Management Unit, is created from waste. The tripod, for instance, comes from discarded pipes, and the switchboard and batteries from other waste materials. The bulbs in the device are manufactured by the girls, as is the charging board.

The young women’s innovations changed the lives of so many in the village. And yet, they were often asked, “Why don’t you do something that girls do? Why are you wasting your time on electrical equipment?” But the girls were determined. “So many of our friends are already married. Girls in our village seldom have a choice, parents get them married as soon as they finish the 9th or 10th grade because they can’t support them. We’re not going to be like this. We’ve learnt these skills so we can be financially independent, and we hope to open up a different path for other girls in our village.”

Dipika, Priti, Rani, Aparna, Usha, and Puja exemplify determination and ingenuity. Their journey is not just about creating a technical solution for a local problem; it’s about challenging gender norms, pursuing financial independence, and inspiring a new generation of girls to dream and achieve beyond traditional expectations.

हम हैं प्रकाश
I am Light





NEELIMA JERATH

MOHALI, PUNJAB

“When we speak about women’s empowerment, it is also necessary to change the attitude of men.”



“We always need women in leadership roles, but power isn’t just handed over easily. We have to work hard to earn it. There’s no replacement for putting in the effort and endeavour,” says Dr. Neelima Jerath.

Neelima has never shied away from hard work. She’s been out in the field in industrial areas, checking out things like the impact of industrial effluents on plant species, not the kind of terrain women are expected to venture into. She’s pioneered research projects in traditionally male-dominated spheres, bringing women into them and tackling the resistance faced as a result. She firmly believes that women are capable and strong, and can take on anything, and that men must support them.

Previous page: Dr Neelima Jerath, the first female director general of a Science City Museum in India.

This page: Dr Neelima Jerath in a mobile van taking Science City exhibits across Punjab.

Page on right: Dr Neelima Jerath in a bird-watching session with school children. Dr Neelima Jerath takes a session with Science City staff.

Next page: Dr Neelima Jerath explains exhibits to school children at the Science City.





“As a woman I feel that it is important to teach men to respect women and to accept them, because I have seen that many a time people, especially men, do not accept women bosses easily. When we speak about women’s empowerment, it is also necessary to change the attitude of men.” Raised in a supportive family environment, it was when Neelima went to university that gender discrimination kicked in—her chosen field, forest ecology, was largely male-dominated. She addressed this by following her credo: work hard and succeed, and she was able to stay at the top of her class. “I have been inspired by many women visionaries and leaders. We need to be aware of the good work women have done and are capable of doing.”

Today, Neelima has made history as India’s first female director-general of a Science City/Museum (the Pushpa Gujral Science City). She was also the first female executive director of the Punjab State Council for Science and Technology, and is a founder member secretary of the Punjab Biodiversity Board and State Innovation Council. Through the latter, she promotes the inclusion of women in biodiversity conservation, and has worked to encourage ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking amongst girls. Neelima also chaired

the State Expert Appraisal Committee for Environmental Clearance of Developmental Projects.

A project dear to Neelima’s heart is the work she does with rural women through science-based livelihood projects under the Women Technology Park, which trains illiterate and semi-literate women. She has not only helped these women bring their homemade products to the market, but has also been open to building relationships and mutual learning. “I learnt a lot from rural women on how certain resources are used and how they could be processed for use in different ways, including for household use,” she says.

Neelima’s remarkable achievements have earned her accolades, including the prestigious Punjab Government Award. Under her leadership, Science City was also awarded the National Award for Science Communication. Her story is a testament to the power of combining a pioneering spirit with a collaborative approach to drive significant changes in the realms of science, STEM education, environmental advocacy, and women’s empowerment.

I am a Catalyst





NIKHITHA C

BENGALURU, KARNATAKA

“Challenges have loomed like asteroids, but passion overcomes adversity.”



Nikhitha grew up with her head in the clouds. Her home overlooked the old Bengaluru airport and she loved watching planes land and take off. The daughter of a tailor and a schoolteacher, all she dreamed of was becoming a pilot. Had she successfully cleared the height requirement and been accepted by the aviation industry, thousands of Indian students might have lost out on being part of the aerospace world today. Ironically, it's because the course she was studying in aerospace engineering gave her little or no insight into space or anything galactic that Nikhitha, hungry for more, went on to set up the Society for Space Education Research and Development (SSERD).

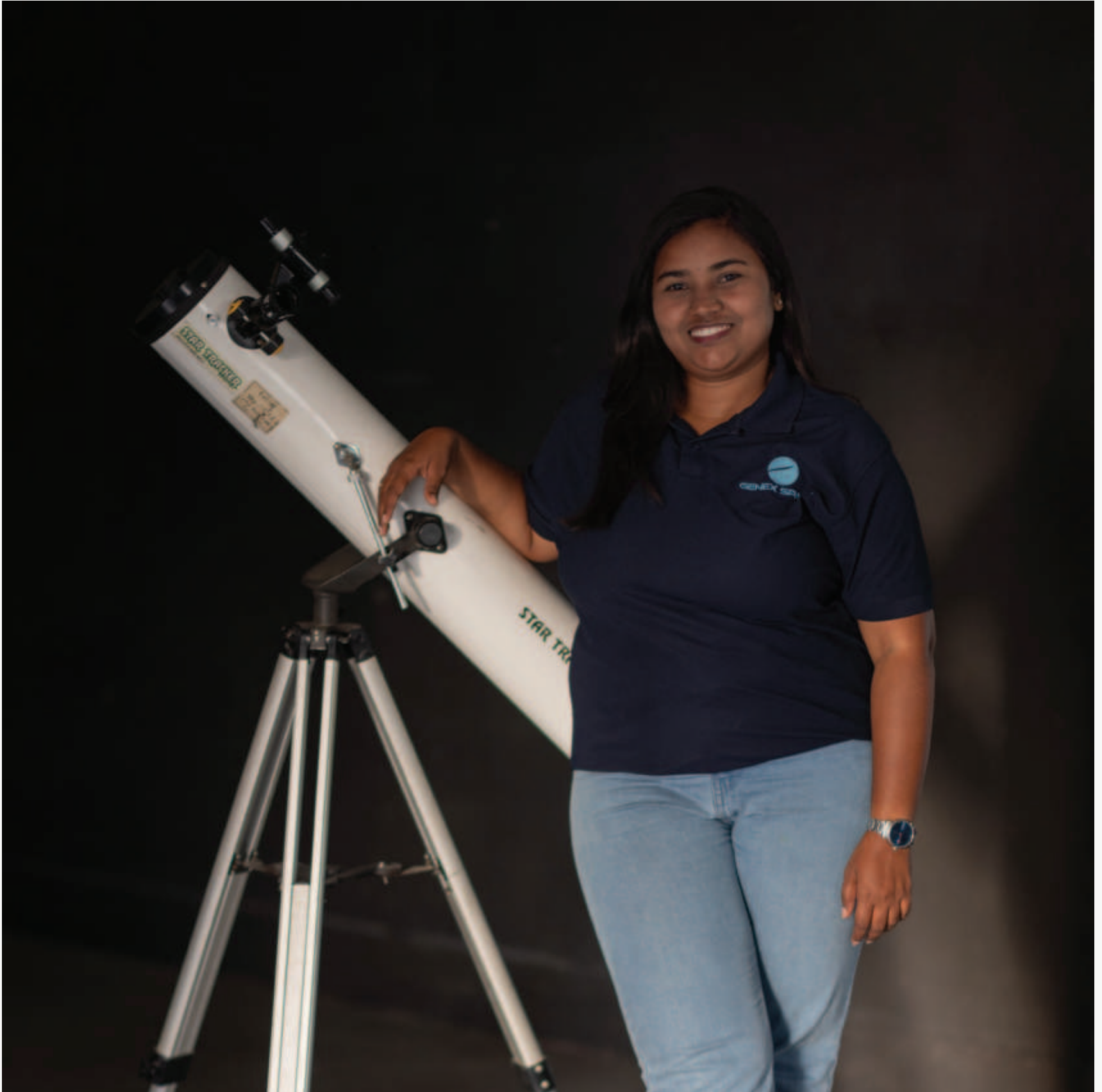
Previous page: Nikhitha C teaching an experimental rocketry workshop run by Genex space at Christ Junior College, Bengaluru.

This page: Students are preparing a rocket before launch.

Page on right: Students at the experimental rocketry workshop conducted by Genex Space at Christ Junior College, Bengaluru. A student celebrates after the launch of her rocket. Students launch a rocket they made during the workshop.

Next page: Nikhitha, founder of Genex Space, that has developed space modules for India's CBSE school curriculum, and has spread awareness about space in the Philippines, Ghana, Oman, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka.





“There were no basic, let alone immersive, experiences that gave Indian students, interested in space, a chance to preview this majestic field or its fascinating academic tracks,” says Nikhitha. This was the gap that SSERD attempted to fill. The non-profit offered a unique space education program that demystified the world of space for school students and opened them up to possible careers in the field. Students loved it, but for Nikhitha and her colleagues, there was a difficult truth they had to face: “We were a not-for-profit without any entrepreneurial experience, and it became difficult to sustain the organization.”

Nikhitha returned to academia and was offered the Dr. Kalpana Chawla Scholarship at the International Space University in France. Her peers were professionals from esteemed organizations like the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and European Space Agency (ESA), and her subjects ranged from space medicine to space law. She returned to India and set up Genex Space, a for-profit space-ed company offering a variety of activity-based courses for grades 1 through 12. The courses cover astronomy, aeronautics, aerophysics, space science and technology, and every other aspect of space. Genex Space also focuses on skill-development programs and training for college students studying engineering, and mid-career professionals in the space domain looking to explore career opportunities. The bootstrapped company was soon invited

to create space educational content for the ISRO. “Other institutions focus on the history of space. We teach our students about the present and future.”

“Challenges have loomed like asteroids,” says Nikhitha. “I was questioned and scoffed at by professors. My family was deeply disapproving of the initial non-profit aspect. And when it came to running a business, I had no skills or experience.” But Nikhitha did not give up. She followed her credo: “There will always be detractors, just nod and keep going.” And today, many students who participated in her program study at top universities worldwide and work at institutions like the ISRO, DRDO, and top-known private space startups.

Genex Space has also developed space modules for India’s CBSE school curriculum, and has spread awareness about space in the Philippines, Ghana, Oman, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka.

Nikhitha’s story is one of unwavering determination and innovation in space education. Her commitment to opening up the skies for those who dare to dream has not only changed the landscape of space education in India, but had also inspired and empowered a new generation of space enthusiasts globally.

हम हैं भविष्य
I am the Future





RIA RUSTAGI

NEW DELHI

“No one should have
power over your
mindset, except you.”



Ria Rustagi lost her sister, Pankhuri, to an undiagnosed brain infection. Pankhuri was only 25. Grief stricken, Ria was determined to do something that could help others suffering from brain illnesses.

Neuphony, set up with her partner Bhavya Madan, and manufactured by her technology startup PankhTech, was created in memory of her sister. The idea was to develop a wearable device that could detect different types of brainwaves and monitor brain activity. Neuphony is one of the top 10 neurotech businesses in the world, and helps people understand their brain health. The device and the

Previous page: Ria Rustagi at her office in Noida.

This page: Ria supervises operations at the Neuphony office.

Page on right: Ria with her older sister Pankhuri Rustagi (left) who died of a brain infection in 2016. Jay Sharma, a Neuphony employee, takes a break in a brain gym. Neuphony's flagship product is an EEG headband—a wearable brain device that utilizes neurofeedback technology. It captures essential mental data and provides users with insights into their stress levels and external focus scores.

Next page: Ria Rustagi is the CEO of Neuphony, one of the top 10 neurotech businesses in the world which helps people understand their brain health.





information it provides helps people gain self-acceptance, and work on their brain fitness, whether through tackling stress and anxiety, or working towards gaining inner peace and resilience, all of which help avoid long-term difficulties such as self-doubt, burnout, and depression.

"One of our clients, a woman in her early 20s, was close to ending her life when Neuphony's wearable device indicated that her brain activity was outside the normal range as stress had invaded her life. She sought treatment and worked on her mental health. Today, she is a yoga teacher."

Ria, the CEO of her company, runs a young team with an average age of 27 to 28. "I suffer from PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, myself, but I think we have to talk about mental health issues and I want to eliminate the stigma associated with these conditions."

Funded by the Government of India, Neuphony was adopted by NIMHANS and by researchers, wellness practitioners, and consumers worldwide. Ria's innovative neurotechnology approach has equipped individuals to improve their focus and well-being through daily meditation and neurofeedback techniques.

Ria also came up with another interesting idea to help people understand mental health: brain gyms. This strategy allowed Neuphony to overcome the business-to-customer challenge in India. These brain gyms allow one to try meditation, mandala painting, puzzles, and various other brain training techniques, and to track their impacts in real time. Today, Neuphony has 17 brain gyms in India and 7 in Europe. "While all this is great, and I may be the CEO, I still have to face gender discrimination; it is so deep-rooted. I'm often told that I am a woman and an engineer, I shouldn't be the CEO of the company," says Ria.

The goal of helping bedridden patients communicate with their families, and of helping those like her sister understand mental health and brain activity is what keeps Ria going. She is turning grief into resilience. Women, Ria feels, should stick to their goals: "Be your own cheerleader and critic," is her advice to them. Ria's journey from personal loss to neurotech pioneer is a testament to the power of resilience and innovation in leadership.

हम हैं धैर्य
I am Patience



DEEPTI SAWHNEY

Gurugram, Haryana

Deepti Sawhney, 51, is revolutionizing the education sector with her visionary approach to bringing quality education to India's farthest corners. Her leadership model is one of disruptive innovation, challenging conventional norms, and proving that women can lead and transform industries traditionally dominated by men.



DIVYA HEGDE

Udupi, Karnataka

Divya's work embodies a leadership model grounded in sustainability and gender justice. She believes in the pivotal role women play in driving environmental change. Her mantra, "Don't get discouraged when you are called difficult. "Difficult" is sometimes used for someone who is strong and knows what they want," underscores her resilient leadership when advocating for climate action through the lens of gender equality.



NIKITA DIXIT

New Delhi

At 31, Nikita Dixit is spearheading a media revolution with a commitment to empowering women. Inspired by the strong women in her life, Nikita's leadership model is one of empowerment, utilizing media as a tool to challenge and change societal perceptions and norms around gender issues. Her approach is encapsulated in her assertion, "My biggest support comes from the community of women (and men) who reach out to let us know how we've made a difference in their lives."



RINA DAS BAUL

Birbhum, West Bengal

Rina Das Baul uses her platform as a Baul Fakiri singer to champion social justice. Her music, infused with messages of unity against social ills like caste discrimination and domestic violence, showcases her leadership as a cultural influencer. Rina's model of leadership leverages art and tradition to foster social change, reminding us, "Divinity can be found in our hearts."



MEGHA BHAGAT

Bengaluru, Karnataka

Megha Bhagat, a 37-year-old from Bengaluru, co-founded Project DEFY to democratize education for marginalized communities. Her leadership model is one of grassroots empowerment, creating 'Nooks' or community centers that provide digital access and learning opportunities for women and girls. She believes that education is a catalyst for change.



RUHA SHADAB

Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Ruha Shadab founded the LedBy Foundation at the age of 33 to address the systemic barriers faced by Indian Muslim women. Her leadership is transformative, creating a space for mentorship and growth that was previously unavailable. Ruha's dedication to inclusivity and empowerment is reflected in her observation, "It was exhausting to constantly be the only Muslim woman in school, college, and the workplace. It was tough to find a mentor I could identify with."



HARINI RANA

Mumbai, Maharashtra

Harini Rana, 35, based in Mumbai, navigated the male-dominated sports journalism industry to emerge as a sports editor. Her leadership model is pioneering, breaking barriers and changing perceptions about women in sports media. Harini's journey is a testament to the power of perseverance and confidence. As she notes, "Sports has allowed me to break free from the conservative society I see around me, it has given me avenues to collaborate with like-minded individuals. I believe integrating sports into Indian culture can create a more inclusive and equitable society."



KIRAN KANOJIA

Faridabad, Haryana

Kiran Kanojia, a 37 year old from Faridabad, turned a personal tragedy into a source of inspiration as India's first female blade runner. Her leadership model is one of resilience and motivation, inspiring others to overcome adversity and embrace their potential. Kiran's transformative journey is encapsulated in her realization, "I wasn't sure if I would ever walk again, and here I was touching the finish line! It gave me an adrenaline rush, made me feel alive."



VIMEE BINDRA

Hyderabad, Telangana

Dr. Vimee Bindra, 43, champions women's health through her work with the Endometriosis Foundation of India. Her leadership model focuses on empathy and advocacy, refusing to underplay women's pain and striving for solutions that enhance lives. Dr. Bindra's commitment is evident in her conviction that: "Women are brought up to believe that they must deal with pain, suffer it in silence. But pain is not normal and should not be played down. Every woman should seek a solution if she experiences pain, rather than suffer in silence."



SWATI BHARGAVA

Gurugram, Harayana

Swati Bhargava transformed her life through education and entrepreneurship. Leading CashKaro, she navigates a male-dominated industry with a leadership model centered on mentorship and empowerment, striving to create more equitable opportunities for women. Swati's journey from Ambala to the boardroom embodies the transformative power of education, as she shares, "Education changed my destiny, it flew me to places I could only dream of."



NEEHA NAGPAL

New Delhi

Neeha Nagpal has carved a niche in the legal world, contributing to significant cases such as the decriminalization of homosexuality in India. Her leadership model is one of courage and innovation, creating a positive and supportive environment for young women in her firm. Neeha's persistence in the face of adversity is captured in the following reflection: "When I started out in law, the field was so hostile. No one took me seriously or believed I was capable of anything."

EMERGING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP MODELS

Women's leadership models in India are evolving, reflecting the changing socio-economic and cultural contexts of the country. Women have faced multiple barriers and challenges to accessing education, health, employment, and decision-making spaces, but they have also demonstrated resilience, agency, and innovation in overcoming them.

The book brings out the stories of women leaders whose approach is grounded in the lived experiences of the communities they represent and work with. The leadership models that emerge from these stories from various parts of India are diverse and context-specific, but they share some common attributes, such as being community-oriented, collaborative, empathetic, transformational, equitable, and empowering. These models differ from traditional leadership styles, which tend to be more hierarchical, competitive, authoritative, transactional, and exclusive.

Each story is a testament to these women leaders' courage, determination, and impact. Together, they encourage us to recognize and celebrate the transformative power of women leaders.

Within feminist practices, transformative leadership is characterized as a method of guiding with a feminist outlook and a commitment to social justice. This involves individuals and groups undergoing personal and collective transformations to leverage their power, resources, and skills within non-oppressive, inclusive frameworks and procedures. The aim is to rally others, particularly women, towards a common goal of social, cultural, economic, and political transformation, striving for equality and the fulfilment of human rights for everyone.

Common threads when women lead:

1. **Inclusive leadership:** Central to this transformative process is inclusive leadership, particularly evident at the grassroots level. These leaders champion inclusivity, drive transformative action, and engage deeply with their communities. Drawing from firsthand experiences and community insights, they prioritize collective well-being over hierarchical control, fostering positive change.
2. **Empowering leadership:** This dynamic leadership style operates as a beacon of vision and inspiration. Its purpose is to

cultivate capacity and disseminate knowledge across diverse spheres – communities, governments, NGOs, and other entities. By challenging existing structures, it champions gender empowerment and advocates for systemic transformation, moving away from conventional top-down directives.

3. Creative and innovative leadership: This distinctive leadership approach is deeply anchored in an intimate comprehension of community needs and cultural heritage. It thrives on creative solutions that honour and seamlessly weave in local traditions. By skillfully balancing pragmatism with cultural preservation, this style ensures economic progress without compromising the rich tapestry of cultural identity. This results in holistic growth that harmonizes tradition and innovation.
4. Mentorship and pioneering leadership: In the realm of male-dominated fields, this leadership style boldly carves new paths. It not only mentors future generations but also establishes key benchmarks. By trailblazing and making significant impact in specific fields, it defies traditional gender norms, opening fresh vistas of opportunity. Their emergence often stems from overcoming adversity, and leveraging personal challenges as catalysts for change and leadership.

These models differ in scope and impact, from the localized, bottom-up approach of grassroots leadership to the holistic, top-down strategy of empowerment leadership. For example, creative leadership focuses on artistic and cultural nuances, while mentorship and pioneering leadership emphasize scientific and technological advancements.

The leadership styles of women offer deeper insights into gender-specific challenges and promoting a balanced approach to development that considers economic, social, and environmental factors. Leveraging the strengths of women leaders for high-impact projects involves understanding community needs, fostering inclusive processes, innovating context-specific solutions, and mentoring future leaders. Key takeaways for corporate social responsibility, policymakers, and civil society organizations include recognizing and supporting women leaders, integrating gender equality and empowerment into all initiatives, investing in women's holistic development, creating platforms for networking and collaboration, and addressing systemic barriers to women's leadership.

Countries across the world can learn from the leadership models of India's women, adapting their successes and overcoming challenges specific to their contexts. This global dialogue and collaboration can enhance mutual learning and support, celebrating Indian women leaders as role models and agents of change worldwide.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the amazing women leaders featured in our book, *वैश्व: When Women Lead*. Your stories are inspiring, and we're so grateful you shared them with us and the world. A huge shoutout to the organizations in our network for introducing us to many of these incredible women.

A special thanks goes out to everyone—individuals, teams, and organizations—who supported us and believed in this project. Your encouragement was key to bringing this book to life.

We're incredibly thankful to the team at Ford Foundation's India, Sri Lanka and Nepal office, for trusting us to gather and share these powerful tales of leadership.

We can't forget our wonderful all-women crew of writers, photographers, editors, and designers, plus our in-house pros. Your talent and hard work shine on every page. We would also like to duly acknowledge Plork School of Thought for the creative direction they provided at the start of the project.

Huge thanks to the Government of India and the Ministry of Women & Child Development for their collaboration during India's G20 presidency. The focus on 'women-led development' really sparked the idea for this book.

If we missed thanking anyone, know that your contribution has been invaluable, and we're just as grateful to you!

The UN Women India Team

Supported by:

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