



A Ray of Hope in Difficult Times - Women SHG Members turn COVID Warriors.



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Women SHG members expressing their gratitude for this opportunity to help during crisis with the support of the CSR wing of BNY Mellon.

“INVALUABLE WOMEN RESOURCES BUILDS SOCIAL CAPITAL IN DIFFICULT TIMES OF COVID 19

The Covid 19 crisis has forcefully confined 1.3 billion Indians to their homes, in an unprecedented 40-day lockdown by the Nation in an attempt to defeat the corona virus. As a curse to mankind, it has caused irreparable damages to the economy across the globe, especially in India. It has left in its wake disastrous consequences and propelled people and the global economy in quarantine.

The Women Self Help Group movement began 15 years ago, to transform the lives of women tremendously. It was game changer for the socially, economically and vulnerably backward women, especially in rural areas. For the first time, women came together to recognize their needs, understand their potential and value their contributions within the household, and the society at large. They were able to understand, the power within them to effect change in their communities and experienced empowerment through participatory decision making processes, the feeling of involvement in their communities and their own development has helped sustain this movement till date. These voices and helping hands have only been growing stronger and more resilient over the years and they have taken control of deciding the course of their development.

In these extraordinary times, when we are all united in our fight against the Covid 19 virus, these women's groups are playing a critical role,” said Junaid Ahmad, the World Bank's Country Director in India. It is true the collective action and strength of Women SHG’s has come to limelight again.

Actions Speak louder than words is true of a small group of 15 women, hailing from Illedu, a remote village, in Chengalpattu district of Tamilnadu; who came together to turn COVID warriors. Using their skills, they began to produce 5000 safety masks in a week and silently went about creating awareness among the vulnerable rural communities in remote villages. They were

instrumental in saving the lives of many, through their efforts of distributing masks and creating awareness about this deadly virus.

These women a year ago (2018-19) were trained by National Agro Foundation supported by the CSR funding of BNYM under “*Skill Development Training For Rural Women Entrepreneurs*”. These women are from economically under privileged section of the society, and are made further vulnerable by the nature of being destitute, physically challenged, older unmarried single women. They hail from a remote village in Tamilnadu, where they earned their livelihood either as agricultural laborers or as MNREGA daily wage labor. National Agro Foundation played a crucial role in changing the lives of these 15 women, through its focused skill development and livelihood intervention program. By selecting the most vulnerable and weaker section in the society, NAF has given them a second chance at life with dignity.

They were brought together for training on Jute bag making for a period of 15 days at the Center of Rural Development Campus, 100 kms from Chennai. The women showed not just skill but commitment as well and maintained a strict attendance and time. They learnt to stitch and manufacture 15 variants of jute articles.

Within a week after completion of training, 5 women started their own Jute bag manufacturing unit by taking orders from school teachers and schools to stitch jute hand bags, lunch bags and water bottle pouch etc. This entrepreneurial spirit just displays, that with the right opportunities and encouragement, women do have the power to change their lives and their communities. Their enthusiasm towards starting an enterprise to earn a better and decent livelihood within village without compromising their household duties, has earned them respect in their communities and given them a sense of financial freedom and choice to engage as community leaders and examples for other women in their community.

In a rude shock to the entire Nation with the onset of the global pandemic of COVID 19, their livelihood was at stake, many people lost their jobs, their sources of income due to the lockdown. Most of the community members being daily wage laborers and fall under the un organized work force, didn't have a choice, but to stay home with no access to any source of income to feed their families

It was at this critical juncture that BNY Mellon in association with NAF provided a ray of hope to these women SHG members. They were given a job order to prepare cloth face masks. The women were only too happy to be involved in this great cause against this deadly virus and came together to use their skills and fulfill their commitment. They completed the order of manufacturing 5000 face masks within a week.

Each woman earned about INR 2000 in 7 days, while the grim reality of dependence and scarcity hit the other families in the village as they queued to get their INR 1000 for their family card. Access to finance or earning an income in these trying times is unimaginable for the remote community of unorganized workers, however, these women have been instrumental in not just aiding their families but even their community members by showing the way of providing face masks and creating awareness in their own ways about COVID 19.

This has been made possible with the generous support of the CSR arm of BNY Mellon and the field team of National Agro Foundation for their advice and support on ground.

This is Sivaranjani, aged 32 years; W/o.late Mr.Jany (Chennai), a widow. Three years back, she lost her husband and was left with a five year old daughter. Though she completed her DMLT, she could not go out in search of a full time job, as she had to take care of her infant child.. She readily, participated in the skill training provided by BNYM and



honed her skills in tailoring. She now earns a decent amount to provide for herself and her daughter without having to depend on her family members or outsiders. She proudly volunteered to become a COVID warrior, to show her solidarity against this war to control the spread of this deadly virus and has been part of the team stitching face masks for the community and creating awareness amongst her peers.

This is Ms. Sudha, D/o Ezhumalai, 38 years, a physically challenged single woman. She is unable to sit for prolonged periods of time due the deformity in her legs, which causes much



discomfort and pain. She is educated upto class X, but was unable to pursue further education due to many challenges.

She too attended the skill development training organized by NAF at CFRD and benefitted from

learning new skills. She has proudly come forward to become a COVID warrior, by rendering her skills to stitch face masks for the community and contribute an income to her family through this venture. Women like Sudha are frowned upon in our society for being a burden on their families and being unproductive, however; even in these difficult circumstances, she has proved herself to be capable of earning INR 1500, competing with other women who are physically fit and contributing to the income of her family through productive means of livelihood. She expresses her whole hearted gratitude to National Agro Foundation and BNY Mellon for their support and encouragement in changing her life and showing her a way ahead.

