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"Sisterhood" brings rights to India's low-caste, rural women

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By Nita Bhalla

Fri Mar 9, 2012 2:48am IST

AHMEDABAD (TrustLaw) - When the women of Ganeshpura village began their fight for a patch of overgrown wasteland two decades ago, they were mocked by men, scorned by neighbours and ignored by officials in this conservative, patriarchal region of western India.

Not only were they women, but they were also from an impoverished, low-caste Hindu community - shunned to the level that they were banned from using the village well for fear they would "contaminate" the water.

The idea of giving these poor, illiterate women access to land, and for them to be able to make an income from it, seemed preposterous to others, including their husbands and families.

"It's hard to believe the life we had and the way we were treated," says 45-year-old Geeta Senma, wearing a hand-spun, light-green cotton sari, as she crouches over her maize crop and hacks away at weeds with a machete under the midday sun.

"We had no land, no respect, no rights. It's been a long, hard struggle, but look around and see what we have achieved with the land we fought so hard for. It's really due to our strength as a group to fight for our rights."

The land Geeta now cultivates, along with 54 women from her village in Gujarat, has turned from dense scrub, once filled with scorpions and snakes, to a vast, lush and lucrative plantation.

On 10 acres - the size of eight football fields - the women organically grow everything here from lemon and custard apple trees to cotton and wheat as part of their cooperative, the Ganeshpura Vanalakhsmi Cooperative.

The secret of their success, say Ganeshpura's women, lies in the "sisterhood" they found through joining the Self Employed Women's Association, or SEWA - India's oldest and largest female trade union, which organises women to use their collective voice to gain rights such as land and employment.

LIFE WITHOUT LAND

In rural India, an estimated 15 million families are both poor and landless, says Landesa, an international charity working on land rights in the developing world.

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Some families are headed by women, but deep-rooted traditional views discriminating against women mean wives, daughters and mothers often lack legal entitlements and inheritance rights.

Others, like those in Ganeshpura, are from low-caste or tribal communities who have for decades been marginalised, often forced to work for meagre daily wages for landowners who have trapped them in a cycle of bonded labour and debt.

"Our families had nothing - we had no fuel, fodder or steady income. We worked on other people's farms and got about 100 rupees in the month," says Leela Solanki, a member of the cooperative, sitting under the shade of the plantation's neem trees, 80 kilometres northwest of Ahmedabad.

"We did not send our children to school. We had little to eat - mainly eating chapatti (flatbread) with tea or with chilli twice a day. Some days we got vegetables but mostly not."

The community had no clean water or toilets, say the cooperative's members, leaving their children prone to diseases and requiring medicines they could not afford.

Like much of India's low-caste rural communities, they also faced social discrimination - prevented from attending public festivals, speaking at the village council meetings or even buying milk from the same vendor as villagers from a higher caste.

In the late 1980's, representatives from SEWA visited Ganeshpura village and learned of the problems the women and their community were facing.

The trade union organised meetings with the village women - helping them see that their strength as a group could help them fight social and gender biases and persuade the village council and district authorities to lease the wasteland and register them as a cooperative.

It took three years - listening to jeers, jokes and insults from village men and district officials - before they acquired a 30-year lease for the land and the registration of their business.

The cooperative's members are now earning more than thirty times the amount they used to, have toilets and water taps in each of their homes and are sending their daughters to school to ensure that they become empowered like their mothers.

SISTER POWER

SEWA - which has 1.3 million members, two-thirds of whom are rural - helps its members gain full employment and self-reliance through cooperatives such as the one in Ganeshpura.

"When women are not organised, they cannot come together in sisterhood, and assert their identity. They are not even seen as workers and so their work is not counted and they are given no value, no dignity, no respect," says Reema Nanavaty, SEWA's director of economic and rural development.

"Therefore it is very important for women to come together, to have that feeling of solidarity and sisterhood. It gives them recognition of their worth and gives them the confidence to speak out for their rights."

But SEWA's work does not just stop at helping women raise their voice.

To ensure that members can sustain themselves in their new-found self-employment, the organisation provides tools, equipment and training for its members - from how to cultivate a new crop to managing the accounts of their business.

The trade union also provides a guaranteed market for its more than 100 cooperatives - which produce everything from tea in Assam to turmeric in Gujarat - through its own marketing company which sells goods procured directly from farmers and processed, packed and sold by rural women.

"The strength of SEWA is in its members, who take action to improve their livelihoods," says Roberto Zagha, the World Bank's country director in India, adding that its model is already being replicated in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Afghanistan.

Geeta Senma agrees.

"We decided to take control of our lives and we have not only improved our lives, but also gained identity, confidence and respect from those who shunned and mocked us," she says.

"People look at us in awe now. We have been in airplanes to conferences in countries like Malaysia and Thailand to share our experiences. Before we were scared to even cross road in the big cities."

(Editing by Rebekah Curtis)

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