

Indian women empowered to Smile

Commercial projects for poor and disadvantaged women often fail for such reasons as product quality and insufficient markets. **Azad Essa** tells of an organisation in India, Smile, which is successfully empowering women and providing some economic independence.

“I was previously just a housewife, but now I earn Rs1 000 to 1 500 (R200 to R300) per month, which adds to my family income and boosts my confidence. It has definitely brought a change to my life.”

Like Suman Bhandare, thousands of women in the city of Pune, 300km away from Mumbai, India, have a reason to smile. The Savitri Marketing Institution for Ladies Empowerment (Smile) is an organisation that strives to empower disadvantaged women by creating spaces for economic opportunity and skills development.

Smile aims to train and enhance the skills of these women, and subsequently markets their products in Pune. The brainchild of Vandana Chavan, the then mayor of Pune, Smile was the off-shoot of a successful literacy drive in 1997 through which 52 000 illiterate people across Pune were taught to read and write. In addition, they were taught the basic tenets of hygiene and immunisation as well as basic budgeting and saving.

According to Mrs Kulkarni, an employee of Smile, it was during

the literacy drive that the women themselves showed a keenness to push the empowerment programme to beyond mere literacy programmes.

“They suggested that they were skilled in certain fields like beauty products, stitching and painting, but they were not getting a market.”

This prompted the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) to adopt the empowerment programme as an official local project, and Smile was born as a joint project between the Sfurti Mandal (women’s club) and the PMC’s Urban Community Development Department.

QUALITY RULES

Since opening its doors at Lokmanyagar and later at Vishrambaugwada, the neatly arranged shops have stocked bright red, orange and green handcrafted garments, ornaments, bags, wallets, toys, lanterns, health products, and even a variety of long lasting pickles. Strictly accepting only recyclable and eco-friendly products, Smile addresses a host of socio-economic challenges facing women without losing sight of

broader environmental struggles.

The attractive colours, designs and good quality material showcased in the shops, is no coincidence. “Every Wednesday committee members and suppliers meet and products are selected for sale. At this meeting, suppliers are guided and given new ideas for their products.” Such has been the response to Smile that according to Mrs Kulkarni, “We are getting bulk orders from Yasada and Crossword Stores.”

Originally, only products received from women below the poverty line (BPL) category were accepted. However, it became clear that the women often needed guidance, direction and in some cases, full-scale training and access to equipment to produce goods that secure large numbers of customers. This meant that middle-class women or more privileged women were allowed to take part in Smile, if their activities were empowering through skills transfer, guidance or through the provision of capital.

Explained Vandana Chavan, “middle-class women at a certain stage find themselves stuck in the house. As a result, many get

involved in some sort of social work, like Smile, and money is not their priority."

Individuals and self-help groups form the bulk of the contributors. Another significant contributor takes place in the form of clusters. These are made up of disadvantaged women who are trained and employed to create specialised products. They are coordinated by a cluster-head or a woman from a more privileged background.

Until 2007, Smile kept 10% of the selling price for underprivileged individuals or self-help groups and 15% from clusters. But with Smile's increasing success and independence, it now bears its own administrative and honorarium costs for volunteers, while the PMC still covers the rent and electricity expenses. To cover the new costs, Smile has increased its handling fee to 15% for the self-help groups and to 20% for clusters. "Of course the ladies can be the beneficiaries who come from a poor background, but we don't want to only fit into this social commitment slot. We have to become commercial," explained Chavan.

INCOME AND EMPOWERMENT

For thousands of women involved in the Smile network, the opportunities for self development, entrepreneurship and independence have given them a big boost. Mehrul Khan, for example, was able to fund her daughter's university education through Smile.

The venture has also enabled those with existing skills to become trainers and facilitators, adding further to the esteem and empowerment of women. "I used to make chaklies (fried crisps) and laddoo (sweets)," says Sheema Bhagada, "and used to give them to Smile to taste. After my products were accepted and sold completely, I started training women in self-help

groups, and now we have big brands like Big Bazaar ordering from me."

But Smile has not only managed to assist disadvantaged women. Sujata Powar, from a once-well-to-do family was able to rescue her family from a financial crisis through her large variety of uniforms, hand stitched bags and wallets. Today, Sujhata employs four women from the neighbourhood to deal with the demand.

While Smile has secured a lucrative market, attracted tourists and also "middle-class socially conscious" Indian women, its prices have been deliberately maintained far below market costs. Surely higher prices would result in larger economic benefits for the women? Chavan argues that Smile has to first secure a loyal consumer base, and secondly, by maintaining an extremely competitive price, the organisation will attract lower-end consumers. This is an attempt to expand socially conscious consumerism.

Smile is happy with its rapid progress, but it is the first to admit that there are many issues it needs to address. One of these is tracking how the women use their earnings. Are their earnings used to uplift their homes, or is it abused by their husbands and families? Smile feels it would be useful to know these things in order to assist the woman to save and spend wisely.

Smile has managed to get nationwide attention for effectively making a difference through democratic and transparent processes. Seen as a model of urban development, the Maharashtra state government has ordered that every town and city in the state launches an organisation which incorporates the values of Smile.

Chavan elaborates, "At a poverty alleviation workshop with members of parliament in Jaipur, India, Smile



Women from Smile sew and sell their goods in the Vishambaugwada branch

was lauded as one of the best practises of empowerment and poverty alleviation, eliciting further interest in Smile's objectives and principles as a model to be adopted in larger India." LB

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