

HELPING FORGE A PATH AHEAD FOR STRUGGLING MICRO-ENTERPRISES



RAJESH KUMARI (Haryana)

Perseverance and courage. That's defined Rajesh Kumari's journey and those of the many women she's assisted along the way.

Rajesh Kumari is one of the Biz Sakhis (Business Supporters) in her village of Pataudi block, Haryana. A new programme initiated by United Nations Development Programme in the times of Covid-19, Biz Sakhis are helping identify and counsel micro-enterprises that have suffered during the lockdown. Rajesh Kumari was chosen as the Biz Sakhi from her village of Fazalpur Badli and has been part of the programme since September 2020.

“Once we got the training, we went back to our village and gathered the women in our groups,” she says. “We asked them about their experiences. They would tell us about their losses and ask, how do we recover from this?”

Biz Sakhis like Rajesh Kumari were chosen from cadres of women already formed under the Haryana State Rural Livelihood Mission / National Rural Livelihood Mission. Mobilised since 2014, the women form Self-Help Groups and start livelihood activities. They have already established trust and deep connections in their villages. So instead of training new people, UNDP connected with them, working through the local NGO Traidcraft.

The programme, running from July to December 2020 in Mewat and Pataudi in Haryana aims to sensitise 2500 individuals, train 1000, and re-establish 200 microenterprises.

The youngest of seven children, Rajesh Kumari was (unusually) allowed to study up to 11th standard. Married at the age of 15, she became a mother to two sons early in life. Once they were in high school, she wanted to find a way to contribute to the household.

For the past four years, she has been first a Village Facilitator and then a Community Resource Person with the National Rural Livelihood Mission. She's even used her tailoring skills to coordinate a Sewing Centre run by an NGO (Bansuri Foundation).

“It is difficult when women are not allowed to go out of the house, when even husbands and in-laws don't allow it. It is hard for women to gather up the courage,” she says. “It was the same for me. At first my husband would tell me, don't go here, don't go there.”

Rajesh Kumari has brought the same perseverance to helping other women.

One instance stays in her memory – a woman named Renu who she met when posted in Gurgaon. Renu has four daughters and a son. Although her husband drove an auto, he drank away his earnings and she was trying to educate her daughters through the government school. Rajesh Kumari tried to get Renu into the Village Facilitator programme. It was very challenging, but she persevered through several attempts. Today, she has climbed the ranks to become a Community Resource Person. Her eldest daughter has become a Village Facilitator. With both salaries coming into the household, the women have gained strength. It's also slowly changed the husband's attitude – he now even offers to drive them to the other villages where they need to go!

For the many micro-enterprises that have had to shut their doors during the lockdown, Rajesh Kumari is hopeful that the Biz Sakhi programme will help them succeed in the same way.