

# Civil society coming to the rescue of women

*“Either way, change will come. It could be bloody, or it could be beautiful. It depends on us.” – Arundhati Roy, Indian author*

■ Varsha Singh

Empowering a woman entails giving her social rights, political rights, economic independence, legal rights, and guaranteeing all other rights that are given to men. Women in India have made considerable progress but a lot is yet to be achieved. India became the first Asian country to achieve its Mars Mission in the very first attempt but it is ironical to see that the same country is positioned 29th among 146 countries in regard to the Gender Inequality Index. A large section of women remain deprived of their basic rights in India but there are several Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) which are fighting for women’s rights and empowering them through their work.

## Women on wings

Women on Wings is a foundation that was initiated in the Netherlands in 2007. It was founded by two Dutch women who wanted to improve the lives of rural women in India. The founders had volunteered for Missionaries of Charity in Kolkata and were exposed to the plight of Indian rural women.



In 2006, both of them joined in a management development programme with the Dutch organisation SharePeople, which brought them again to India. They worked with a team of Dutch managers on improving business results of small social enterprises in India. The founders of Women on Wings experienced that the intervention was making a noticeable difference to the Indian enterprises. After a few weeks they heard that Sadhna, one of the enterprises, had incurred a noticeable increase in its turnover because of the changes suggested by their intervention. Sadhna sells beautiful products which are handmade by rural women and the organisation became Women on Wings’ first business partner in India in 2007. The partnership still stands and Sadhna has grown from employing 100 female artisans to almost 700.

The organisation while talking to BE informed, “India is a large and rapidly expanding global economic power. The middle class is growing too. Yet, the underclass lives on just two dollars a day. There is very little paid work in rural India. Families lack income and there are high levels of poverty, malnutrition and illiteracy. Women on Wings co-creates jobs

for women in rural India. A job means an income, economic autonomy and an escape from the cycle of poverty. Research shows that women are more prone to spend their income on their families.”

The organisation believes that when rural women have control over the household money, it has positive implications for the immediate well-being of the family. It also has a positive impact on raising the level of human capital and economic growth through improved health, nutrition and educational outcomes. It is the way to break the cycle of poverty.

In its ten years, the organisation has linked 2, 30,000 rural women with their 35 partners in India. According to them empowerment is, “Being able to stand up for yourself, make your own choices and decisions, be heard, be valued, be respected, learn and educate yourself either through books, role models or experience.”

## Apne Aap

Apne Aap was founded by twenty two women from Mumbai’s red light district with a vision of a world where no woman could be bought or sold. The founders were the subject of Ruchira Gupta’s Emmy award winning documentary, “The Selling of Innocents,” which exposed the trafficking of women and girls from Nepal to India. In 2002, Apne Aap registered as an NGO in Mumbai and the members reached out to other women trapped in prostitution and organised alternative self-empowerment programmes in Bihar, Delhi and West Bengal, where Apne Aap is currently working in local communities. They help women to learn about their rights and also teach them to combat prostitution and forced slavery.



Self-empowerment groups across the country meet at Apne Aap community centres and women and girls gather there to get access to education and receive legal rights training. Today, Apne Aap’s work reaches over 21,000 women and girls and the organisation continues to work tirelessly. The organisation’s recommendations for incorporation in the Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2017 is pending before Parliament.

## Commit2Change

Commit2 Change (C2C) is an NGO that started in 2010. It helps in educating orphan girls in India and focuses on rural and less developed areas. Their work has impacted the lives of more than 100 girls till date. The organisation believes that empowerment is the power of choice. C2C creates systematic change to break the cycle of poverty. C2C repaid the loans of Rajitha, an orphan girl from Andhra Pradesh who went through welfare schools and completed her secondary education. From there she went on to do her masters in the US, specialising in web design and works as a Java developer today. In return, she has promised to support another girl. Sumana Setty, the Co-Founder of Commit2Change told BE, “The girls in our orphanages are carved from a painful past but still insist on daily hope. When given the opportunity to tell their stories, they will be a catalyst for change in their worlds.”



## WASH United



WASH United is an NGO that has been intervening in the area of menstrual hygiene. It also provides medical facilities to women. The acronym WASH stands for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene. WASH United works to create a world where everyone uses adequate sanitation and practises hand washing. It aims to empower women to manage their menstruation in a hygienic, safe and dignified way.

The organisation aims to create awareness about proper sanitation and menstrual hygiene management. A study from UNICEF revealed that one out of three girls in South Asia knew nothing about menstruation prior to experiencing it while 48% of girls in Iran and 10% of girls in India believe that menstruation is a disease (WaterAid 2013, Menstrual Hygiene Matters). The NGO is responsible for eradicating taboo subjects. It also educates women on protecting themselves against diseases and on keeping themselves clean during their menstruation.

The organisation mainly works in South Asia and Africa. In India, WASH United and UNICEF launched the Team Swachh Bharat (“Team Clean India”) initiative leading up to the 2016 ICC T20 Cricket World Cup in India. Working with the Indian cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar as a role model, the Team Swachh Bharat campaign had reached millions of Indians with the importance of toilet use. The organisation ardently believes that good menstrual hygiene management starts with education.

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## Sayfty

Dr. Shruti Kapoor founded Sayfty in June 2013 after being horrified by Nirbhaya gang rape in December 2012. Sayfty aims to prepare women about the different kinds of violence which are targeted against women. Sayfty teaches women self-defence techniques. The NGO runs workshops in different cities to teach women to recognise abuse and prepare them to combat such abuses.



The organisation educates women and girls about the issue of violence against women by using digital media, storytelling and gender role discussions. Their online campaigns empower women by making them more aware of their rights, helping them to identify and speak out against gender violence. They also provide safe spaces (online and offline) for open conversations with boys and men to bring about a fundamental shift in the perception of violence against women. Sayfty also runs various social media campaigns.

## CREA

CREA was founded in 2000 and is a feminist human rights organisation based in New Delhi. It is led by people who work at various levels for women’s rights and advocates the sexual and reproductive freedom of all people. Not only does CREA conduct courses and trainings in India, East Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East to “strengthen feminist leadership, strategies, and collective power for social transformation,” they also hold public discussions, debates, events, and online and offline campaigns to create awareness and to question traditional societal gender norms. It also works to advance sexual rights.



## CARE India

CARE India has been working for over 65 years to empower women affected by poverty and social discrimination. Present in 14 Indian states, they aim to provide women with the tools and resources they require to empower themselves to deal with poverty, disaster, and injustice. During FY 2016-17, CARE India directly reached out to 25 million people through 40 projects across 12 states, covering more than 90 districts.



CARE focuses on the empowerment of women and girls because they feel women are disproportionately affected by poverty and discrimination and suffer abuse and violations

in the realisation of their rights, entitlements and in control over resources. CARE works to provide women with affordable healthcare, jobs, and places special focus on entrepreneurs. The organisation also provides immediate support to disaster victims and helps to rehabilitate them.

### Snehalaya

Snehalaya means 'Home of Love', and was founded in 1989 by Dr. Girish Kulkarni to provide support for women, children and LGBT communities who have been affected by AIDS, trafficking, sexual violence, and poverty. Based in Ahmednagar in Maharashtra, Snehalaya works across 18 projects in rehabilitation, health, education and advocacy.



The organisation informed BE, "We currently have 17 projects catering to 20,000 beneficiaries each year. Till date we have helped more than 186,658 beneficiaries." Snehalaya was awarded the Presidential Award in 2012 for its community services. They have opened the Snehalaya English Medium School to provide education to their rehabilitation centre children who were struggling in mainstream schools as their HIV medication and restricted health affected their concentration and attendance. They also have an IT centre that helps those without computers.

Satyamev Jayate a popular television show featured Snehalaya's pioneering work in preventing female feticide in its first episode. The organisation's message for women's day is "Impart education to all the girls so that they can be educated and empowered to lead the way to a great future not only for themselves or their family but for the nation as a whole."

### Swayam

Swayam is a feminist organisation committed to advancing women's rights and ending inequality and violence against



women and their children. Swayam was established in 1995 and works at the local, regional, national and global levels. Swayam facilitates the empowerment of women's survivors of violence and provides them with holistic direct support services keeping in mind their psychological, emotional, physical and economic needs, with the ultimate objective of enabling them to become self-confident, self-sufficient and self-reliant.

They work with women facing violence in their lives and facilitate a process of 'self-discovery' that enables them to move

ahead with confidence and dignity. Their direct support services includes one to one counselling and psychotherapy, legal advice & aid, contact and follow up with the police, follow up with the court proceeding, career counselling, vocational training, dropping centre that provides women with a conducive fair free and relaxed atmosphere. Financial aid is also offered for those who cannot afford legal fees.

Swayam has drop-in centres which are essentially spaces where women can get away from their troubles and be by themselves. Equipped with a television, music system, and toys for children, the women can sit and read, drink tea, sleep, talk and relax. They are members of a number of national, international and South Asia level networks amongst which AMAN is one of their international network of organisations working on domestic violence.

The organisations message for women's day is "Stand up for your rights and raise your voice against any form of violence inflicted on women and girls and explore your opportunities and claim your space." Acid Survivors & Women Welfare Foundation

### (ASWWF)

Acid Survivors & Women Welfare Foundation (ASWWF), formerly known as Acid Survivors Foundation India (ASFI), was founded in 2010 in Kolkata and has been relentlessly working against acid violence. The organisation has also been working to help women who have been targets of different forms of violence. The NGO acts as a forum for advocacy of acid related causes and endeavours to promote a social environment conducive to the elimination of all forms of gender violence.

The organisation has helped around 57 girls in eastern India and 110-120 in India. Sulekha Begum, a 53-year-old was attacked by her husband Mirza Farooq, who used to repeatedly force her to bring money from her parents' house. Her husband threw acid on her and she lost vision in her left eye. She was severely burnt. ASWWF is working on her compensation and has gone to the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), South -24 Parganas to ensure that she gets a compensation of ₹3 lakhs.

Reshma Khatoon, a girl from Siliguri in West Bengal, was attacked by her friend when she refused his proposal for marriage. ASWWF supported her and provided money for her surgery and also helped her with rehabilitation facilities. She gained vision partially and has completed computer training in Bangalore.

ASWWF informed BE "We are rebuilding the lives of the victims and getting them into the mainstream in society. It is our privilege that we have been a part of their growth." ■

## Entrepreneurs

# "It is absolutely necessary to equip yourself to earn a livelihood, own your life and be responsible for it"

*Salebhai.com is an e-commerce marketplace that enables consumers to order a range of specialities directly from their hometowns and discover regional specialities from across India. Purba Kalita, the co-founder of Salebhai, manages the business development team, helping them sift through various products to handpick one-of-a-kind offerings that best define a region's speciality and its migrant communities' needs.*

*BE's Varsha Singh spoke to Purba Kalita regarding the space for women in the emerging start-up space and on the challenges that she had to face.*



Purba Kalita

**Q. A number of women entrepreneurs are emerging in the start-up sector. What in your opinion is attracting women to the sector?**

**A.** The main driving force is the same as for men. It is the passion to see their ideas converted into something concrete and a conviction in their abilities to solve real problems. With the government encouraging India's start-up ecosystem and with the emerging presence of suitable platforms, more entrepreneurs are surfacing across the country. As far as women founders are concerned, they are a brave new tribe that are not only exemplifying independence but also doing so on their own terms.

**Q. What made you come up with Salebhai? How successful has it been since 2015? How many women have got jobs through this and how does it work?**

**A.** Data on migration in the 2011 Census reveal that two out of every five Indians are migrants. Migration not only creates a void in people's lives but also incurs a market gap because of the lack of original products from their hometowns. We decided to launch Salebhai.com to take people back to their roots by focusing on the requirements of over 17 diaspora communities spread across India and abroad. With products sourced from over 100 cities and 350 select sellers, the company provides people with an opportunity to buy products in various categories from sellers across India.

A big part of Indian society still operates under the impression that women's education and careers are expendable. Marriage and children take precedence after a certain age.

Till December 2017, we had achieved a Gross Merchandise Value (GMV) of ₹3 crore and revenue of ₹1.1 crore. We have at least 60% women in our workforce. While our main office is in Ahmedabad, many in the marketing, business development, and content and communications team who are mostly women work from across India.

**Q. In the US, the percentage of women founders in the start-up sector is estimated to be around 18% but in India only 9% of start-ups were founded or co-founded by women. What do you think is the reason behind this?**

**A.** A big part of Indian society still operates under the impression that women's education and careers are expendable. Marriage and children take precedence after a certain age. Things will change when society understands the necessity of women's inclusion in the economy and provides them with equal opportunities.

**Q. What, according to you, is woman empowerment?**

**A.** Self-reliance. It is absolutely necessary

to equip yourself to earn a livelihood, own your life and be responsible for it and that is regardless of how much your father, husband, or anyone in the family earns.

**Q. What major problems do women face when establishing a start-up business?**

**A.** I think it is the absence of a strong support system. Starting a business that would take long hours and enormous pressure is not an easy decision to make. Secondly, not all entrepreneurs - let alone women - start off on an equal footing. Not everyone has the privilege of education in elite institutions, strong communication or networking skills, or access to basic technology to start off their businesses.

**Q. How are women positioned in India when it comes to starting a business on their own? What have been your struggles?**

**A.** The start-up space is rapidly transforming and its industry interface is increasing rapidly. Companies such as Salebhai.com are becoming launch pads for women entrepreneurs, who in turn are empowering women by generating employment opportunities.

When you join a company, you are required to play a particular role. But when you start your own, you have to get involved in

everything. It ranges from doing what you did as a rookie at the beginning of your career to handling top-level functions and everything in between. Then there is the challenge associated with building your team.

**Q. Women-owned start-ups receive significantly less investor funding. Only 2% of all equity funding raised in 2017 went to start-ups with women founders. Your comments.**

**A.** When you note that only 9% of start-ups have women founders or co-founders, 2% funding does not seem too stark in comparison. However, in the larger picture, the start-up ecosystem is a competitive one and to be weighed down by archaic gender stereotypes can do both investors and start-ups a lot of harm. Women are building amazing businesses with brilliant ideas and that should be the trigger for funding.

**Q. Do you have a message for the women who are planning to do something big on their own?**

**A.** You need conviction to stay the course. Have faith in yourself and your team. Be patient. Think long and hard about your plan, but once you've decided - go all in. Like Arianna Huffington says, "You have to do what you dream of doing even while you're afraid." ■

## Leading the way in planning green events

*Many women entrepreneurs believe in giving back to society. Some of them do so by being green crusaders and take up environmental causes. Tamanna Sharma, Founder and Director of Earthling First (OPC) Private Limited, a start-up that works for green and sustainable environment spoke to BE's Ankita Chakraborty about her journey.*

**Q. What is Earthling First?**

**A.** Earthling first is one of our very first environmental projects. It works on sustainable events and waste management. Essentially, we help event organisers with sustainable alternatives to the non-recyclable or reusable products or materials that they use. We help them with economical solutions that do not cost too much but at the same time are also healthy for our environment. For example, in lot of events there are a lot of cutleries that are not reusable. So, we try to find a better solution for that in the given local environment. As we source locally, we try to provide the benefits to the locals and that is also a part of our sustainable goal. Whatever waste is created during the event, we make sure that it is segregated on source.

**Tamanna Sharma**



We work on all areas of waste management but our focus is on reducing waste. We start with the planning where we give event organisers newer options. For example, paper cups. They are compostable if they are made of just paper but if it is paper lined with plastic, then the cups are neither compostable nor recyclable. So it isn't a good option at all. We focus on the life cycle of the product, on how it is made, the kind of resources used, its ideal disposal method and try to find the best eco-friendly solutions locally.

**Q. Who are your partners?**

**A.** Our partners are essentially those who recycle products. For instance, when there is a lot of plastic generated, we have a partner who recycles plastics. Similarly in terms of composting, we try to find a local solution for composting as well, or send it to a biogas plant if possible. While sanitary wastes have to go into the landfills, there are things that cannot be recycled like flexes. We repurpose them as much as possible but such products eventually need to be sent to the landfills as well. However, in cases of medical wastes, we generally urge the medical team to take it back because they are essentially responsible for the medical waste disposal.

**Q. What made you come up with the start-up?**

**A.** I was studying journalism. Eventually, what I got into was campaigning. Climate change and environmental issues have always been issues close to my heart. The story of our initiation may sound unique. The department of environment had organised an event on Earth Day. I went to the event with high hopes but what I noticed was too much of waste being created. If an event that is dedicated to the earth is creating so much trash, I wondered what happens to other events. That was the first time that the idea of starting this organisation occurred to me.

**Q. And your struggles?**

**A.** Well, it took me a while. It has been more than a year that we have started this company but the first few months went in convincing people. We got our first opportunity at the brand Maruti Suzuki Devils Circuit. More followed. We are their pan-India partner. Wherever they go, we make sure that none of the waste created is disposed unscientifically. The first six months of our work went in tethering our project. Eventually we got a chance with Devils Circuit. We have had several clients like the Border Security Forces. We regularly partner with them for organising their marathons. Oxfam India has also given us an opportunity.

**Q. As a successful entrepreneur, what are your views on women empowerment?**

**A.** In our organisation, we have a policy that whenever we are hiring for an event, we look for equal participation of men and women. What tends to happen in these areas



We focus on the life cycle of the product, on how it is made, the kind of resources used, its ideal disposal method and try to find the best eco-friendly solutions locally.

is when we tie up for such events it is only men who are working. So initially it was a constant fight, because in my experience, women work just as hard as men. There is no difference because we want people who are dedicated towards the work. We encourage women who have to look after their children and people with disability. But in small cities women generally don't come out of their houses. When I was in Jaipur for an event, it was very difficult for me to find any women to work with the men. Wherever we go, we ensure that women get equal opportunity to work in an environment where they are considered weak and my experience tells that women can do anything.

Even today there are no exclusive departments for sexual harassment, sufficient leave for maternity, and many do not think that equal opportunities need to be given to women. I have been highly inspired by women entrepreneurs. Especially in green entrepreneurship, I see a lot of women coming up and doing amazing things. Nonetheless, we need both men and women to work together for this cause.

**Q. Your future plans?**

**A.** Right now we are focusing primarily on events. We would like to create the event from scratch and show the world that a green event is possible. We would also like to get into more projects on sustainability. We are already working on and enhance our cooperation from villagers who make eco-friendly products. ■