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Few people make huge proclamations in social work

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Not just a micro effort

From being an advisor to the Government of Kazakhstan under a USAID Trade and Investment programme to being the director of operations for a microfinance company, Praseeda Kunam had pursued her varied interests by exploring opportunities in different fields.

She succeeded in most of her endeavours, yet there was something more she had always desired to pursue. And after working with a multi-national bank as a manager for a capacity-building initiative for a start-up, she decided it was time to make her contribution towards the society for the generosity it had bestowed upon her.

And in an endeavour to achieve that, she started Samhita Community Development Services, an incubator for specialised development initiatives specially targeted towards the betterment of the disadvantaged and dispersed populations and Samhita Microfinance, a microfinance initiative that focuses on women empowerment.

Though she has been a part of the entire microfinance scenario, Kunam says that she wanted to do something more for the many remote areas, which still remain inaccessible and excluded from the mainstream economy. "Because transactional costs are high, it is difficult for micro-finance institutions to expand into these regions, and large numbers of people still lack access. Our previous work leads us to believe that with creative solutions, we can actually provide microfinance to these populations that is sustainable and cost-effective," she says.

Although, Kuman has been working for a year on this initiative, she believes that she will get the desired results in due course as they have witnessed optimism and new opportunities with better economic possibilities.

"Our microfinance services help women make decisions pertaining to the ways in which the loans can be utilised for different purposes that enhance increased livelihood opportunities and incomes required for necessary requirements like sending their children to school, purchasing school uniforms and books, and covering health emergencies," she explains.

So how do you eradicate poverty in a country with a population of over 1.1 billion, where poverty rates range from 27 per cent to 81 per cent. "The challenge," she says "of eradicating this poverty and creating an environment for a life filled with dignity, opportunity, and optimism is one of the greatest we have.

This can only be addressed by a concerted effort among many groups." Kaman says that the best thing about her venture is that she is doing what she loves to do. For her, this feels right and the natural thing to do. "And that is a great feeling," she says with a smile.

In times of need

If you are a qualified nuclear physicist, chances are that, by profession, too, you will continue pursuing the same, right? After all, earning a doctorate in theoretical nuclear physics is not easy. But Kalpana Sankar begs to differ. She always had an affiliation towards the concerns of the poor people that dominate the society.

So when she was working with the Government of Tamil Nadu with major focus on issues of micro-finance and poverty, she

knew that the right time to pursue something that she had longed had arrived. So instead of taking up small projects, she thought big and joined Hand in Hand (HiH), as their CEO.

She explains, "I have always felt very strongly about the status of poverty in the state (Tamil Nadu) and also wanted to provide a helping hand to the women and children, struck by it. And when I came to know of Hand in Hand (HiH), I was particularly interested in their vision and in my quest to give something back to the society, I decided to join HiH."

Their main aim is to eradicate child labour and reduce poverty with prime focus on education, employment, income generation, and empowerment issues. "In order to attain this, we are implementing an 'Integrated Community Development Program' with five interconnected sectors. We feel that poverty reduction encompasses several factors and an integrated and holistic approach would be more effective," she explains.

Though HiH is doing its share of helping the ones in need, Sankar says that there is a dire need for more such organisations to take this cause forward. "The problems faced by our poor people are mind-boggling. We have 700 million living on less than \$2 per day and most of them live without basic amenities like toilets and protected water.

Nearly 49 per cent of the children are undernourished. And the only way this issue can be addressed is by working in tandem with the government and identifying the gaps in the system," she expresses.

You may have seen many beauty pageant contestants blurt out lines on "world peace" and "women empowerment" but the ones who translate these words into real-time application deserve the "crowning" glory.

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