

Mainstreaming Resilient Futures Together: Sunita's inspiring journey to her jute bag business



***“Taking a leap of faith will
never not be scary.
If you must take a chance in life,
why not take one on yourself?”***

- Sunita

It is such a minor yet colossal moment when you take a step back and realise that the woman you were a year ago and what you have become now, is an entirely different person. Women are, by nature, resilient beings. From birth, through adolescence, and into adulthood, they are constantly reminded of the way they are ‘supposed’ to be and the lives they are to build for themselves. These societal expectations have less to do with the woman herself and more about pleasing and serving the male counterparts in her life. Yet, women persevere. They break generational cycles to strive for a life they have only dared to dream about in stolen moments. They transcend stereotypes to be the authors of their story- the story with an independent woman in lead who surpasses expectations (even her own) and most importantly, these stories inspire. Sunita's journey is one such story.

Sunita led the life she was expected to lead. She did household chores, took care of her children and husband, and took up menial jobs to support her family. Being a beneficiary under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), she was able to access small jobs for a limited number of days. However, the pay was less, and she was tired of moving from one job to another, none of which proved substantive support or gave her an iota of fulfilment. Entrepreneurship was a foreign concept- a self-employed woman earning on her terms, unheard of! It was the involvement of WE-LEAD (Women Empowerment through Livelihoods, Entrepreneurship and Access through Digitalisation), a project designed to leverage technology to bridge informational and resource gaps for creating sustainable economic opportunities through entrepreneurship, that opened Sunita to the concept. Development Alternatives along with WE-LEAD organised the GIC-KBBL 2.0 (Kaun Banega Business Leader), a competition aiming to deepen and integrate entrepreneurial ideals by inviting women like Sunita to pitch their ideas. One day while passing by the roads of Gubhana, she came across a *nukad natak* (street theatrical performance) advertising the competition. It immediately piqued her interest.

Excitedly she signed up for the competition and underwent the Start to Improve Your Business (SIYB) training to comprehend the intricacies of business management. The training introduced her to concepts like starting a business or effectively delivering a pitch. It was the first time she was presented with an opportunity so unique, and she felt giddy with enthusiasm to build something of her own. Sustainability had always been an important factor to her. This drew her to jute bags.

In an age where polythene bags are suffocating the earth, she wanted to start an enterprise that was sustainable and eco-friendly. Pitching her idea to the judges, she was overjoyed when her startup was chosen as one of the winners. As a part of the competition, she received a sewing machine and linkages to the market- two assets that were the foundational stones in her quest to build an enterprise. Thus, started her journey to self-dependency.

Having a basic knowledge of stitching, Sunita quickly underwent training under the Krishi Vigyan Kendra- an agricultural extension associated with a local university that provides vocational training. This honed her skills and prepared her to commence her own business as a self-made woman entrepreneur. She paired up with Bala and Lalita, two women from her village who also wanted to take charge of their own lives. Sitting serenely behind a sewing machine, wielding a needle, and working tirelessly yet skilfully Sunita works, patiently towards a life she has yearned for. Her enterprise now manufactures custom jute bags.

Taking a leap of faith will never not be scary. If you must take a chance in life, why not take one on yourself? Sunita demonstrated this message and now leads a life she once would have admired. Her journey of breaking expectations and social norms to build a life she can be proud of is an inspiration to anyone she encounters. Believing in someone is the greatest thing one can do for them. Organisations like WE-LEAD and Development Alternatives did so, and continue to do so, for countless women who dared to have a dream and fight for it.