

FORGING AHEAD WITH OUR FAMILIES



Stories of women health workers and family allyship

FAMILY ALLYSHIP WRITING TEAM

Writing and editing team

Ms. Gunjan Khorgade, Action Research and Training for Health, Udaipur

Ms. Pooja Rani Joshi, Action Research and Training for Health, Udaipur

Ms. Rashmi Chabukswar, KEM Hospital Research Centre, Pune

Ms. Sakshi Dhawalikar, KEM Hospital Research Centre, Pune

Ms. Sofia Hussain, Basic Healthcare Services, Udaipur

Ms. Varsha Tol, KEM Hospital Research Centre, Pune

Ms. Vidushi Gupta, PhD Scholar, University of Delhi

Supporting team

Dr. Aditi Apte, KEM Hospital Research Centre, Pune

Dr. Rutuja Patil, KEM Hospital Research Centre, Pune

Dr. Sanjana Brahmawar Mohan, Basic Healthcare Services, Udaipur

Dr. Shubha Nagesh, Advocacy Advisor - Global Health, Women in Global Health

Designing:

Ms. Ashmita Gulechha, Basic Healthcare Services, Udaipur

Ms. Sofia Hussain, Basic Healthcare Services, Udaipur

TABLE OF CONTENTS

04	Foreword
05	Introduction
07	Acknowledgement
08	Claiming independence with responsibility
10	From hardship to hope – a journey of grit and resilience
12	The ‘combination’ that makes it possible
14	Renuka’s Journey: From Maid to Queen
16	A better future lies in changing the present
18	Creating her own path: An inspiring journey of a community health worker
20	With the right support and determination, anything is possible!
22	A fight that benefitted all
24	A Journey of Growth and Determination
26	Winning trust - in herself, for herself
28	Story of a Nurse-midwife: from dreams to accomplishment
30	Destined to reach her full potential
32	Emphasizing self-care as essential to service

FOREWORD

It is a pleasure and privilege to share these stories of women health workers and their families, from rural Rajasthan and Maharashtra in India.

Basic Healthcare Services experience of providing health services in rural Rajasthan for over a decade has shown that the frontline women—nurses, Auxiliary Nurse Midwives, health workers and ASHAs, are responsible for much of the successes in primary healthcare. We see this when a team of nurses treat and save a woman in labor with high blood pressure, or a malnourished child with severe pneumonia; when health workers support a young man with severe Tuberculosis in a faraway village whose family had given up hope, and who with treatment recovers and begins anew; and when a malnourished, apathetic child in a day-care centre transforms into a healthy and energetic one.

On the other hand, KEM Hospital Research Centre, Pune over the last two decades has witnessed the transformative role of women in public health and community-based research. Women field research assistants, nurses, technicians working at the grassroots are the backbone of community based public health research—serving as the crucial bridge between science and society. They ensure that health services reach the most remote corners of society and collect data with integrity and precision. Their work goes beyond the numbers—they amplify voices, shape policies, and drive solutions that matter.

Hand in hand with the women are their families, playing a vital and often unseen role—providing encouragement, stepping up to take care of children and managing household responsibilities, so that these women can fully devote themselves to serving their communities. In remote regions of Rajasthan and Maharashtra, these sacrifices often come at a great personal cost, yet these families stand by their women, knowing that the work they do is not just impactful but essential for the community's survival and well-being.

This collection highlights not only the work of these extraordinary women but also makes visible the role that their families play. Despite navigating deep-seated patriarchal systems, these women rise above, proving that when given the opportunity, they are not just able to lead—they excel, innovate, and create tangible change. We hope these stories inspire both rural and urban audiences, encouraging greater recognition and support for the vital contributions of these extraordinary women in public health.

There is one more reason that makes this work very special: all of us are Alumnus / members of the present cohort, of the Leadership Journey curated by WomenLift Health. We look forward to continued collaboration and collectively take steps towards a more just, equal, and compassionate world.


Aditi Apte
Rutuja Patil
Sanjana Brahmawar Mohan
Shubha Nagesh

WIDENING THE FOCUS...

Women's Day is an opportunity to celebrate the hard-earned progress that has occurred over numerous years in our pursuit of goals of gender equality and a more just society. While much has changed, many hurdles still remain. Specifically, for those who live in relatively more challenging conditions, the road to a better life is still a rocky one. For women, their gender identity continues to be entangled with several other social factors. So, when they forge on, turning obstacles into milestones, it is imperative that we bring their stories into celebratory focus.

This time, however, we are widening this focus to also include those who play inspiring supporting roles in these stories. This series features stories of our frontline female health workers and their families. They highlight the role that family support has played in enabling our health workers to excel in different ways. In writing about those who care for our professional careers, we acknowledge their contribution in creating the positive difference that has permeated in the lives of numerous others.

The stories majorly feature women who hail from or are currently working in the rural parts of Rajasthan and Maharashtra. The health workers were identified by the respective parent organizations. We went to different villages and areas to conduct the interviews with the health workers and with one member from each of their families. While interviews with the workers were conducted in-person, in cases where families lived far, interviews with the family members were conducted telephonically. A conscious effort was made to select those lives that had shown the proof of continuous family support and remarkable progress in their professional journeys.



Every story is unique in its own way. Each offers a fresh perspective, generates awe and holds an inspiring nuance. A daughter who almost decided to give up on everything, a husband who decided to stay at home to support his wife, a mother who came to the rescue of her isolated childbearing daughter, parents who encouraged their daughter to carry on after divorce, and more – these stories reflect the beauty and strength of human spirit, and most of all, what love of family can do.

The noise and chatter of the world sometimes paints all lives with common notions of what is ordinary or extraordinary. But sometimes, beneath the seemingly ordinary, lies a journey quite extraordinary. We bring to you few such stories – of struggles and scarcity, of persistence and resilience, of those commendable victors and their ever-supportive allies. We hope they inspire you as much as they inspired us. We hope they urge us all to look beyond the ordinary. We hope they humble us with the realization that while being supported is a blessing, extending support is a mark of great strength and generosity. Thank you for joining us in celebrating them!

*On behalf of the family allyship writing team,
Sofia & Vidushi*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our remarkable women workforce who welcomed us, shared their stories with open hearts, and made us feel so warmly at home. Their welcoming and wholesome spirit, along with the support of their families, made this book truly special.

We are immensely grateful to the dedicated writing team, Gunjan Khorgade, Pooja Rani Joshi, Rashmi Chabukswar, Sakshi Dhawalikar, and Varsha Tol for their invaluable contributions of capturing the authentic voices of our frontline women. Their meticulous work in conducting interviews, crafting compelling narratives, and ensuring each story resonated with truth and heart.

We wish to express our sincere appreciation to Ashmita Gulechha for her exceptional design work. Her creative talents transformed these stories into a beautifully crafted booklet, making this tribute truly memorable.

And last, but certainly not least, we extend our deepest gratitude to the incredible team from Basic Healthcare Services, KEM Hospital Research Centre, and Action Research and Training for Health (ARTH) who brought this project to life. What began as a small idea, conceived on short notice, blossomed into a meaningful and fully realized tribute.

This book is a testament to the power of teamwork, dedication, and the celebration of the remarkable women who inspire us every day.

CLAIMING INDEPENDENCE WITH RESPONSIBILITY

Nurse Reena shares how she learnt to make decisions independently and how being responsible is key to earning and retaining family support.

When Reena Baranda was selected for ANM (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife) training, not many in her village knew what the course was or what it entailed. Now, for the 23-year-old, it has been almost two and a half years since she has been working as a nurse at the Amrit Clinic of Ghated village in Jallara block, around 20 km from Salumbar district and around 160 km from her own village, in Rajasthan.

Before her training as an ANM, Reena had never left her mother's side. *"The training period was tough for me because that was the first time I was staying by myself away from home. I used to feel quite lonely. I was also not very comfortable interacting with strangers. I used to feel anxious around others."*, she shares.



For Reena, while time helped her to gradually settle and become more comfortable, what brought about the real change was a backing from her parents, who pushed her to start making decisions on her own. *"Once I started living outside, then whenever I would ask permission for anything, my father would give me courage and say, 'Whatever you do, we have full trust in you that you will do the right thing.' He would say that I need not ask for every little thing, that I should learn to do things and make decisions by myself."*, she recalls her father's words admiringly.

As she started working, the financial independence that came with it gave her more courage to develop confidence in herself and in her ability to extend help to others as well. *"I don't have to ask anyone for money now. I can go buy what I need on my own. And if anyone else in my family needs help, then I am in a position to support them as well."*, she says with satisfaction.

Reflecting on how she had been raised to always do things on her own, she further shares,

“My parents never forced me to do anything. Every day in the evening, we would sit together and talk to each other. They wanted to ensure that as I grew up I did not hide things from them. They would teach me things like, ‘never be dependent on others, do things on your own, believe in yourself first and foremost, that self-belief is crucial to doing the right thing’”



There is another inspirational aspect to Reena's upbringing. When she was just around eight months old, Reena was adopted by her uncle and aunt (mama and mami) after they failed to conceive a child of their own. Both teachers, her adoptive parents raised her as their own daughter. Reena is close to her biological parents as well and the whole family shares good relations.

Taking lessons from her own family, Reena too believes that a healthy joint family is in a better position to support women who wish to work outside, especially in rural areas. Though unmarried herself, Reena is aware that married women face greater challenges when it comes to getting family support.

Her accomplishments and mature outlook at such a young age reflect her impact on the community as well. *“Whenever Geeta didi took any session, and if there were young girls and women present, she would refer to me and say, ‘Look at her! She is so young and has come so far to work here. So why can't women from our region work?’* She shares pondering on the lack of encouragement for women in rural areas.

So, has she seen any kind of difference in the community since she started working? *“I have seen this shift that women have now started coming forward to talk. Gradually, I also learned the local language to talk to young girls who would previously feel shy. They felt a sense of closeness when I talked to them in their own language. Interaction with men has also become easier”*, Reena says looking back at her own experience.

For Reena, the process of gaining emotional and financial independence is connected with upholding her family's trust and living with responsibility. That is the key to retaining family support as well. *“Whenever I make a mistake and then if my parents scold me, I listen quietly. If I don't, I might commit the same mistake again. When our parents repose their trust in us, it is our responsibility to maintain that trust.”* This sense of responsibility makes the woman dependable and self-reliant, and *“when a woman becomes self-reliant”*, Reena says, *“she will teach the same thing to her children as well. That is how change permeates in the larger community.”*

FROM HARDSHIP TO HOPE – A JOURNEY OF GRIT AND RESILIENCE

Defying all odds, Ashwini Naghot demonstrates how a refusal to give up and a determination to go on can help one overcome even the most difficult times



Born and raised in a small town in Maharashtra, Ashwini Nighot grew up in a family of three siblings. Her mother was a homemaker, and her father struggled with unstable employment and alcoholism. Life was filled with hardships, often making even two daily meals uncertain. When Ashwini was still young, her father passed away, forcing her elder brother to discontinue his studies due to financial constraints. To support the family, her mother took up domestic work, ensuring the children could survive despite their struggles.

Ashwini's childhood was marked by difficulties, but the unwavering moral and emotional support from her mother and maternal relatives helped her push forward. Growing up in a stressful environment, she and her siblings learned resilience and perseverance. Ashwini later married Mr. Ramchandra Nighot, a certified teacher employed on a contract basis. However, after a year or two of marriage, his contract ended, leaving him jobless. As their family grew, financial struggles persisted. Facing a dispute with her in-laws, Ashwini left her marital home while pregnant and sought refuge with her maternal uncle, where she stayed until her delivery.

Determined to build a stable life, she and her husband moved to a small plot of agricultural land, where they built a modest hut. To support the family, her husband started a poultry business, while Ashwini took up part-time work at a computer training center. As expenses increased, they explored various means of livelihood.

Realizing the need to enhance her skills for better job prospects, Ashwini enrolled in an Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) certification program. After completing the course, she began working at healthcare centers and hospitals within her community.

With her growing expertise and dedication, Ashwini became a pillar of support in the community. Many expectant mothers were hesitant to seek medical care due to cultural and social barriers. Ashwini provided counseling and support, guiding them to primary healthcare centers (PHCs) and ensuring safe pregnancies and deliveries.

During the COVID pandemic, Ashwini faced numerous challenges in addressing healthcare disparities caused by socio-economic factors. Many community members lacked transportation, access to affordable healthcare, and even basic medical services. Despite these barriers, she remained committed to finding solutions—delivering essential healthcare services directly to those in need.

As a nurse, Ashwini understands the importance of continuous learning and adapting to the evolving healthcare needs of the community. Despite her experience of over 13 years, she remains committed to expanding access to medical services, strengthening relationships between healthcare providers and the community, and advocating for systemic changes to promote health equity.

Today, Ashwini is a dedicated Community Health Nurse with a deep understanding of community needs and challenges, she plays a vital role in connecting individuals to essential health services, providing health education, and advocating for better healthcare outcomes. Ashwini Nighot stands as a testament to resilience, empowerment, and dedication. She believes that empowerment is not just about rights and self-respect for women—it's about equipping them with the tools, confidence, and belief in their ability to shape their futures and make a meaningful impact on the world.

THE 'COMBINATION' THAT MAKES IT POSSIBLE

Nurse Anita Sharma sets an example of how a keen desire to work combined with sincere communication makes for a fulfilling life and an even more successful family.

“She was always interested in working. She wanted to do something that makes her happy and that also allows her to serve others.”, says Naresh, Anita’s husband, when asked about how he felt with his wife working so far from home.

For the past four years, Anita Sharma has been working as a nurse at the Amrit Clinic of Bugdunda village, part of Gogunda tehsil, around 35 kms north-west of Udaipur city. Anita’s conjugal family is based in Jhunjhunu, a city in the northern part of Rajasthan. The distance between the two places is well over 500 km. *“People in the village marvel when they get to know that I have come from such a far place to work here. They say they will never be able to stay this far from home for work. I tell them that I can work anywhere.”, Anita tells with a hearty laugh.*

Was it always like this, though? Anita, still smiling, almost tears up when she recollects the first time she left home for her training as ANM back in 2011. She shares, *“It felt quite different. I cried a lot. My husband said that it was up to me, if I didn’t feel like continuing I could come back home. But I was determined. No matter how bad I felt, I wanted to do it.”*

This determination continued to be fuelled by the unwavering support that her family has always provided.



“I never had to worry about my husband or children. We live in a joint family. They supported me from the start. In fact, the first time I was leaving for my first job, I had no idea where to begin. It was my elder brother-in-law and his wife who packed my bags.”, she proudly recalls.

For Anita, the motivation to work outside was not born out of a financial need but for the feeling of satisfaction it provides. *“I have changed a lot since I started working. I have gained so much knowledge. I really like meeting with patients. Earlier my job was restricted to reporting but after joining BHS, I have learned about different types of illnesses, medicines, how to do lab tests etc. I feel happy when I work.”*, she shares.

Anita started working when her children were big enough to not need constant attention, but the shift was still huge. Her husband, a lawyer, vouches for the positive difference a joint family set-up can provide in this regard. *“In total, we have 15-16 members in the family. So it doesn’t feel like she is so far away from us. Being in a big family has facilitated this kind of arrangement. This ‘combination’ makes it possible. Not only does it give motivation to each other to keep growing, but one also gets the required support to move forward.”*, Naresh shares.



He goes on to share how Anita’s own progress has led to the advancement of the entire family. *“She (Anita ji) was the first in the family to enter this field and then inspired others in the family to join in as well. Our elder son is a doctor now. One of my sisters is working as a staff nurse in Jaipur. My elder brother’s son is also a doctor. My younger brother’s daughter is also training to be a nurse in Sikar.”* In addition to the family, the neighbours too consult Anita widely on health-related matters.

The going did get tough, however. When their children left home to pursue higher studies, Naresh felt an acute need for emotional support and companionship to battle the ensuing loneliness. How did they deal with it then? *“We talked. She understood my feelings. We both then discussed how we can be there for each other while she continues to work. I understand that she is deeply interested in her work, and I am supportive of that. These days, we also have social media and that helps in maintaining constant communication.”*

Anita’s own deep desire to keep working and the continuous support she receives from her family are strung together by a thread of sincere communication. What can enable such a healthy social dynamic to exist for all women? *“Education is necessary to change people’s mindset,”* she says. Anita’s mother used to take tuitions, and her father continues to encourage her sisters-in-law to study more and work. *“My parents don’t ever want me to leave my job. They feel proud knowing that their daughter is working.”*

RENUKA'S JOURNEY: FROM MAID TO QUEEN

She rose from the ashes of despair, proving that inner strength and family support can unlock a future where women are known by their own names- lets step into Renuka's world, where strength is forged in adversity



Renuka's life has been a journey of struggle, change, and success. She is a community health worker at KEM Hospital Research Centre, Pune, and has been working for over ten years. But her journey was not easy. She started as a simple housewife with no confidence, no money, and no respect in her own home. Today at 41, she is an independent woman, respected in her family and community.

Renuka got married at the age of 19. In her in-laws' house, she felt like a maid, doing all the housework but receiving no respect.

"I felt like I was just there to serve, with no voice of my own," she recalls.

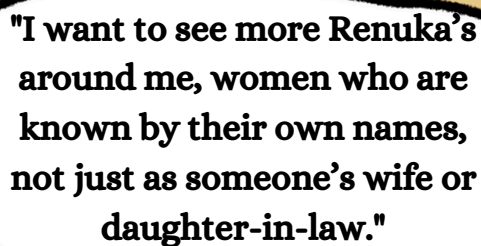
Her life took a sudden turn when her husband had a serious accident and was bedridden for four months. With no one to earn for the family, Renuka had no choice but to step out and find a job. She started working as a community health worker and that was a life changing moment for her.

In the beginning, people looked down on her. "My neighbors, whom I once considered friends, stopped treating me as an equal because I didn't have a proper house," she shares.

But as she started earning, things changed. Slowly, her family and friends started respecting her. Her communication and convincing skills made her popular in the villages where she worked. Even her husband, who once doubted her, realized her importance and supported her. *"He encouraged me to complete my graduation, and later, my master's degree,"* she says with pride.

Renuka's work brought a big change not only in her life but also in the lives of many women and girls in the villages who now see her as their role model. Women started coming to her for health check-ups and learned about issues like high blood pressure and diabetes. Adolescent girls looked up to her and told her, *"We want to become like you, Renuka Tai!"*

But her journey was full of struggles. Managing household chores, cooking, and taking care of children *along with her job was very difficult.* *"I would come home late, and my children would be waiting, hungry, because my husband did not know how to cook,"* she remembers. Her husband, frustrated and suspicious, would sometimes get angry. *"I had to explain to him, again and again, why my work was important,"* she says. Over time, he understood and started supporting her.



"I want to see more Renuka's around me, women who are known by their own names, not just as someone's wife or daughter-in-law."

There were times when Renuka felt hopeless. *"I hit rock bottom so many times, I even attempted to end my life three times,"* she confesses. But her brother stood by her and encouraged her to fight instead of giving up. *"He told me, 'You are stronger than this. Fight for yourself and your family.' And I did."* Today, her husband, sons, and even her in-laws stand by her. They are proud of her achievements.

She emphasizes that family support has been crucial to her success. *"Without my family's support, I wouldn't be where I am today,"* she says. *"My husband's encouragement and my children's understanding have given me the strength to pursue my dreams."* She believes that family support is essential for women to achieve their goals and become independent. *"When family members support and respect each other, women can thrive and reach their full potential,"* she adds.

Renuka has a message for all young women:

"Speak up for yourself before marriage."

"Be clear about your dreams and career plans."

"Do not let anyone take you for granted."

"Earn your family's trust and respect."

Renuka's dream is to see many more women like her—strong, independent, and respected in their families and communities. *"I want to see more Renuka's around me, women who are known by their own names, not just as someone's wife or daughter-in-law."* She believes that every woman has the power to shape her own future, and she hopes her story will inspire many more to do the same.

A BETTER FUTURE LIES IN CHANGING THE PRESENT

Senior health worker Geeta Meena shares how her transformation and long-term dedication have been guided by her family's focus on a better future.

Laluram Meena, Geeta's husband, left his job in construction around six years ago to stay at home. *"I used to be away from home for months because of my job. In my absence, certain things were getting neglected. The income that I used to earn outside would get exhausted quickly when I returned. If she had left her job, she would not have been able to guide the children well. After leaving the job, I started taking care of the home. Now it is much better"*, he shares when talking about the changes he brought in his own life to support Geeta.

Geeta, on the other hand, has been working for more than 11 years now and has been associated with Amrit Clinics since their inception. The 30-year-old recalls how she got her first opportunity to work - *"After I got married, I used to stay at home only. I would desire to work outside as I had completed some level of education. My elder sister-in-law was the one who had asked Rekha ji to find me some work. She was from Aajivika and had come to our home for some survey. Rekha ji asked me to work with her to reach out to people in the village and share health-related information with them."*

Step by step, Geeta grew to learn many things. She spent the first seven years working in Manpur village and after that joined in Ghated, which is six km away from her own village Bori, and around 20 kms from the main district of Salumbar.



Having been married at an early age, Geeta had never gone beyond Salumbar until then, but just before Amrit Clinics were to be opened, she was selected to go to Chhattisgarh for training purposes. *"My family members were supportive of me going there. At that time, my son was four years old. So I was a bit worried about him. When I was in Chhattisgarh, I cried thinking about my child. But my father-in-law had assured me, told me not to worry and do the training properly."*, she recalls.

This strong support system allowed Geeta to do her best in every task she took up. As she reflects on the changes she has seen over the years, one can also see how her own identity has come to be established within the community. *“When I first started working, not even one woman would come to our meetings. Gradually, as we started reaching out to them, beginning with one or two, we slowly increased the number to 10-15. Now, women also know a lot more about nutrition. Earlier if children fell sick, they would resort to superstitious practices like jhaad-fook. But now, they take their children to hospital and get proper treatment. ‘Because it has been so long working here, if I go out for a few days for training or anything else, people start asking ‘where is Bori-wali madam?’*, she shares with a smile.

Furthermore, the impact on her family too has been no less significant. *“From my first payment, my husband got a motorcycle. Earlier we used to live in a kaccha home. It*



required regular painting, but I did not get the time to do it. Then finally, after saving enough, two years ago, we were able to get two pucca houses made.” What her husband is most pleased with is, however, the impact on their children. *“I supported her thinking that some form of employment would do both – improve our lives as well as secure the future of our children. If parents are not successful, children’s futures cannot be improved”*, he says.

With two sons, aged 16 and 12, Geeta feels happy that both have grown up to take interest in studies and stay away from smoking and drinking, unlike the other boys of the village. On how more women can get family support like her, Geeta says – *“Women should talk to their family members regarding division of household work. If the woman negotiates, stating her desire to work outside, tasks can be divided and accomplished.”*

Geeta’s most recent accomplishment is learning to ride a scooty as part of the BHS initiative to make female health workers more independent in their daily activities. With a broad grin on her face and visible pride in her words, she shares,

“Women can do everything. Earlier, women would not even sit on chairs if men were sitting there. I talk to them to change such a mindset.

They never used to take their husband’s name. I would take mine 10 times and then make them take theirs’ as well. The key is to keep educating and communicating.”

CREATING HER OWN PATH: AN INSPIRING JOURNEY OF A COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKER



Sunita Ameta never imagined her life would take so many unexpected turns. Growing up in a village in Rajsamand district, she had simple dreams, but reality had different plans. She studied until the 10th grade, but when her mother's health worsened, she had to leave schooling. There were fields to tend to, household responsibilities to manage, and a younger sister whose education needed to continue. Sunita quietly accepted her role, not because she had no dreams of her own, but because, in her world, responsibilities always came first.

When she got the opportunity to work with ARTH as a community mobilizer, it felt like a small escape from her daily routine. She wasn't sure how long she would be able to continue, but she liked the work—meeting women in different villages nearby, listening to their problems, and helping them access medical care. But before she could fully settle into her role, her family arranged her marriage. She left her job, packed her bags, and moved to Gujarat. Societal expectations came up - once married, a woman's life was supposed to revolve around her husband's home.

One month later, she was back.

Divorce was not something openly talked about in her village. She returned home carrying silence, shame, and the weight of everyone's questions. Some asked directly, others simply stared long enough to let her know they were wondering. She withdrew from social life, reluctant to step out.

Her father did not say much, but one evening, he told her, *“Life doesn't stop just because things didn't go as planned.”* Her mother, despite her illness, never let her feel like a burden. When Sunita learned that ARTH was still looking for someone in her old position, though eager to work again, she hesitated. Would people talk if she started working again? Would it mean she had accepted that she had no other choice? Despite her doubts, she applied.

Returning to work felt different. It was no longer just about earning money; it was about rebuilding herself. Slowly, she started ignoring the whispers and focused on her work. A year later, when she was offered a promotion, she hesitated again. The new role required her to move to another block, live alone, and manage everything by herself. Could she, do it?

Her mother simply said, *“If you don't try, how will you know?”*

So she moved to Magwas in Jhadol block of Udaipur district. The first few months were challenging—she had never lived alone, never cooked for herself, never managed her own expenses. With her new role, she was now supervising a team of young women mobilisers in the community.

As the days passed, she started to figure things out. Buying a scooter felt like a major milestone— as it would be her own mode of transport. Riding alone on village roads wasn't something she had ever imagined herself doing, but now, she moves from one village to another without any difficulty. She can now effectively travel to interior villages, driving her scooter, which she later received from the organization for her field work.

“Life doesn't stop just because things didn't go as planned.”

Her days are filled with conversations—with women who never stepped out of their homes before, who are just beginning to understand their own needs. Some remind her of her past self, quiet and reserved. Others make her wonder about the future— what kind of stories will they create for themselves? Through her work, she has helped increase awareness about maternal health, encouraged women to access healthcare services, and supported families in making informed health decisions.

She still thinks about how different things could have been. Would she have been happier if life had followed the path she once expected? She doesn't know, but she moves ahead tapping on opportunities and taking challenges head on.

WITH THE RIGHT SUPPORT AND DETERMINATION, ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE!

Through her transformation from a shy young woman to a confident community health worker, Ashwini showcases the indisputable link between professional growth and personal development.

Ashwini's journey is an inspiring example of resilience, determination, and the power of family support. Through her work as a Field Research Assistant (FRA), the 35-year-old has not only uplifted herself but also positively impacted the lives of those around her. Her story stands as an example of encouragement for other women aspiring to carve their own paths, proving that with the right support and determination, anything is possible.

When Ashwini Chitranjan Sharma started working as an FRA 15 years ago, she was a reserved young woman with limited confidence. Speaking in public was a challenge, and she had stage fear. However, her journey as a Community Health Worker (CHW) changed her in ways she had never imagined *"I used to be afraid of speaking in front of people. But today, I can confidently hold conversations, counsel women, and even address a crowd without hesitation,"* Ashwini shared, reflecting on her journey. Over the years, she has gained confidence, overcome her fears, and become a strong communicator. She now interacts with people effortlessly, understanding their emotions and offering not just medical guidance but also emotional support. Her work has also enabled her to learn new skills, such as driving and using digital tools, making her more independent and resourceful.

Ashwini has made a lasting impact on the community, particularly in the areas of Koregaon Bhima and Perne village, near Pune, Maharashtra. She has become a trusted source of information, guiding people to health camps and medical events, *"The community now sees us as their own. They know we are here to help them, and that makes all the difference,"* she said with pride. Though she may not treat patients directly, her role has significantly contributed to building trust in the healthcare system.

Her constant presence and support reassure the community, making them feel valued and cared for. She has also played an instrumental role in counseling women on the importance of education for their daughters, fostering a shift in societal perspectives toward women's empowerment.

Ashwini attributes much of her success to the unwavering support of her husband. In the demanding balance between work and home, he has been her pillar of strength.



From attending school events for their children in her absence to managing household responsibilities, he has played an active role in ensuring she thrives in her career, *"There are days when managing household duties and work becomes tough, but my husband is very understanding. He takes care of the children, helps around the house, and makes sure I never feel alone in this journey,"* she said. His belief in her abilities motivated her to complete her education and pursue her graduation. His encouragement stands as a testament to the importance of family support in a working woman's life.

Ashwini's husband takes immense pride in her growth over the years. He has witnessed her transformation into a confident and independent woman who can handle challenges on her own, "She has become so independent now. Earlier, she would rely on me for everything, but now she handles so many things on her own without even telling me," he said with admiration.

While he remains a strong support system, he admires her ability to solve problems independently, showcasing her growth in decision-making and self-reliance. He describes her as an "all-rounder" who manages work, home, and family with remarkable efficiency, bringing positivity to their household.

Ashwini firmly believes that family support is crucial for any woman aspiring to be financially independent. Without support, managing responsibilities becomes overwhelming. For young women starting their careers, Ashwini has one piece of advice:

"Education is key. If you want to be independent, you need the courage to convince your family to support your dreams. And for families, it's their duty to ensure their daughters receive a good education so they never have to struggle in life."

A FIGHT THAT BENEFITTED ALL

Nurse Sumitra Damor shares why it is important to take a stand for oneself and how people's perceptions can be changed for the better.

Before joining the clinic in Manpur around two years back, Sumitra Damor had only worked in private hospitals. Initially, the move seemed like a change she would not be able to adjust to. *“On the day I arrived here, I cried a lot and told my family that I might not be able to work here. My mother-in-law also accompanied me. She met the other nurses and told me that everyone here is quite friendly. She said that if I still did not like it here, they'll come to pick me up in a few days. Then I saw the living arrangements. I liked it and gradually I became more comfortable here.”*, she shares. And now, she laughs as she says, *“my family teases me about how earlier I used to cry but now I do not go home even when they call me.”*

While private hospitals did have their own share of facilities, they fell short in terms of what they had to offer. She shares, *“I would wake up early to finish some household chores before I left. I used to leave home by 7 am to reach my workplace by 9. I used to work there till 5 pm and then come back home. The work was a lot and payment was quite less.”*

In Manpur, Sumitra has found a sense of satisfaction. She leaves her 2-year-old son at the BHS-run Phulwari in the morning and then picks her up in the evening after work.

“I get paid a lot more too now”, she says as she goes on to list the many things she has learned here. *“I have become more confident. Now, I can also assist with deliveries. I can stitch cuts and wounds as well. I have learned all of this here only.”*



At 28, Sumitra has come a long way from when her father first enrolled her for a nursing course. *“My parents struggled a lot to get my training done. The college authorities would not let us sit in the class if we did not pay the fees in full. They wanted the money first. My parents took debt to fund my education.”*, she shares.

So when after marriage her in-laws resisted her idea of working, she took a firm stand - *“I had to fight. My father had provided for my training as ANM, so I wanted to work. If I would have only done household chores, my father’s efforts would have gone to waste.”*

“I had to fight. My father had provided for my training as ANM, so I wanted to work. If I would have only done household chores, my father’s efforts would have gone to waste.”

Suraj, her husband, recalls that time vividly - *“After marriage, she (Sumitra) stayed at home for five-six months. Initially, I resisted when she said she wanted to work outside. There was a lot of work at home. We had 10-12 buffaloes that needed care and other farm-related work. Then she fought with me and made me understand. Eventually, I agreed and also persuaded other family members. Now that she has started working, they feel very good. Now, other people also know about her capability. Earlier people did not know that she had a diploma in nursing.”*

What kind of changes has her work brought to the family? *“Many!”*, Suraj eagerly shares - *“We have been able to admit our daughter to a better school. Our home in the village is far from the main road. It used to be very difficult just to get the wheat processed.*

Now we have a machine at home. With my father as well, she is able to do the basic tests and tell which medicines to take and at what time. People around our home also come to consult her. They wait for her to come back home.”

Suraj, a civil engineering aspirant himself, works at a hotel in Mumbai. After his father fell ill and had to return to the village, he moved there to earn for the family. He takes out time to study whenever he can. With Sumitra working and the financial support she brings, Suraj also feels encouraged to keep pursuing his dreams.

As Suraj and Sumitra work in different places, back at their home in Sagwada, Sumitra’s mother-in-law takes care of their 5-year-old daughter, and the younger sister-in-law assists with household chores. They have sold a few buffaloes to cut down the work.

On the importance of family support, Sumitra says, *“Family is all we have. Women should be courageous. They should fight. When you assist your family with your income, they understand. In my father’s village too, people would say to him that educating girls is simply a waste of money. But my father did not give up. Education is crucial for having good experiences in life.”*

A JOURNEY OF GROWTH AND DETERMINATION

From cycling through criticism to riding towards change, Jyoti Ravindra Bhosure turned challenges into stepping stones- proving that one woman's determination can spark transformation.



At the age of 20, Jyoti Ravindra Bhosure stepped into the professional world with little experience. Having completed her 11th grade, she had the ambition to continue her studies, but personal difficulties prevented her from completing her 12th-grade exams. Soon after, she got married and became a mother. Despite these challenges, her passion for learning and growing never faded. When she joined Vadu, her seniors encouraged her to continue her studies, and with their support, she successfully completed her graduation, opening new opportunities for her professional growth. Jyoti, now 40, has dedicated 20 years to community health as a Field Research Assistant.

Living in Dhanore, a small village in Shirur Taluka, Pune, Maharashtra, with her family, Jyoti commuted daily to work on her bicycle. The journey was not just physical but also social—her neighbours disapproved of her working, passing remarks that could have discouraged her *"They would say all sorts of things, questioning why a married woman needed a job. But I ignored them. I knew I had to keep going."*

Over the years, she learned to use mobile phones, took computer classes, and attended training sessions that helped her develop her skills. Her work in the community helped her build confidence, and she became a key figure in starting *self-help groups (Bachat gats)* for women, enabling them to gain financial independence.

"Before, I didn't know how to talk to people. Now, I counsel women, guide them on their rights, and prepare them for interviews," she said with pride.

Jyoti's work extended beyond her personal growth—it created meaningful change in the community. She played a crucial role in spreading awareness about women's rights, organizing rallies for alcohol de-addiction, and providing information about child immunization. In a time when ASHA workers were not widely available, Jyoti and her colleagues supported Anganwadi workers by going door-to-door to educate families about immunization. Her dedication also led to counselling sessions for women, encouraging them to seek employment and financial independence with the support of their families.

Her husband, Ravindra Bhosure, played a pivotal role in ensuring she could continue her work. Since there were limited commuting options, he often helped her reach the office. To make her commute easier, he bought her a scooter, *"I wanted to make things convenient for her. She works so hard; the least I can do is support her"*, he said. Her in-laws also supported her by assisting with household chores and taking care of the children. Though society initially criticized her decision to work, her family stood by her, offering encouragement and reassurance.

"There will be challenges, but you must keep moving forward. Solve problems as they come and never give up on your dreams,"

Ravindra Bhosure witnessed a significant transformation in his wife since she started working. He described her as more confident, efficiently managing both work and home. *"She has been the heart of our home. Balancing family responsibilities while excelling in her career is something only a superwoman like her can do,"* he proudly shared. In times of struggle, when society questioned her choices, they chose patience and resilience, proving that perseverance can change mindsets.

For Jyoti, family support is crucial for women pursuing careers. She advises young women to remain determined despite obstacles. *"There will be challenges, but you must keep moving forward. Solve problems as they come and never give up on your dreams,"* she says. Her journey is a testament to the power of resilience, family support, and the impact one dedicated individual can have on an entire community.

WINNING TRUST - IN HERSELF, FOR HERSELF

Phulwari health worker Alki Meena shares her journey of transformation from a hesitant young girl to a stronger and more self-assured woman.

Alki Meena, 23, is a phulwari worker in Medifala hamlet of Dobdisa, a village situated at a distance of around 20 km from the Salumber district in Rajasthan. Seemingly shy with an innate softness, a trait quite evident both in her voice and work, Alki admits to now being very different from when she first began her journey as a Phulwari (Creche) worker.

When she first started working in the phulwari around two years ago, Alki was still a bit unsure. But the opportunity to work while she was completing her last year in school also meant that she will be able to provide for her college education next year. “My father told me clearly that if I did not work, the family would not be able to fund my higher education,” recalls Alki. With both parents engaged in agriculture, a brother who has migrated to Gujarat, and a younger sister in school, Alki felt a pressing need to start working at a young age. While organizational support and her father’s insistence encouraged her to take up the job, continuing it was not easy.

“The kids at school would taunt me. They would laugh at me and say things like – ‘you clean children’s waste and wipe their noses!’ Hearing these things affected me and at one point, I actually decided not to work anymore”, she recollects. “But my father was adamant and said, ‘They’ll keep saying these things but you have to work.’ Then Manju didi and Gautam bhaiya also came and made me understand. I realised that I will have to learn to ignore what others are saying. I will have to become stronger”, she says as she reflects over her transformation.

On the many changes that she has undergone since, her father, Deva Meena shares, “She has learned how to interact with others. Even though she is married, she is working here (in her native village). I want her to keep advancing. If she was not working, she would have married much earlier, like they do in the rest of the village. I made her husband also understand to allow her to study and work. Her marriage happened on that condition. If after marriage, the in-laws do not support, our support will not matter.”



But, didn't her in-laws object to Alki staying in her natal village even after marriage? "They are supportive", Alki responds with assurance. *"They say that their family has enough members to do the household work and so it is fine if I stay here and work. I visit on weekends or whenever I get a chance."*

The strength and support that she received from her family helped Alki focus on her work and learn new things. What she learned as part of her work has also come to impact her family and the larger community in a myriad of ways.

"Earlier, my father would neglect his health even if there was a need for treatment. My experience has increased awareness in the family. One of my relatives also faced certain problems during her pregnancy. She was refusing to go to the hospital and instead preferred other traditional techniques. But, I insisted that she must visit. Finally, she relented and took the treatment.", Alki shares.

She also talks about the difference she has seen in the community during this time, *"Initially when we went to talk to people, they would fight with us and question our intentions. Now, they take medicines and also go to the hospital when needed. Women have also become more conscious about their children's health. They make inquiries regarding their children's weight and other things."*

Taking care of such young children must require a lot of patience and trust. Alki agrees. *"Initially women would come (at the phulwari) and secretly peek inside to check if we were beating their children. Now they themselves say that take our children, discipline them if they are naughty and make them study!"*, she laughingly says.

From deciding to give up both work and studies to becoming the endearing 'Aali Madam' who is sorely missed by children when she is on leave, Alki attributes her transformation to the push and encouragement she received from her family and peers.

"My family did not know how women can make their career but my father knew the importance of work. Even if the woman is not able to understand out of her own ignorance, it is important to keep encouraging her. Like me, she might resist at first, but eventually she will understand. I am happy that I made the choice to work."



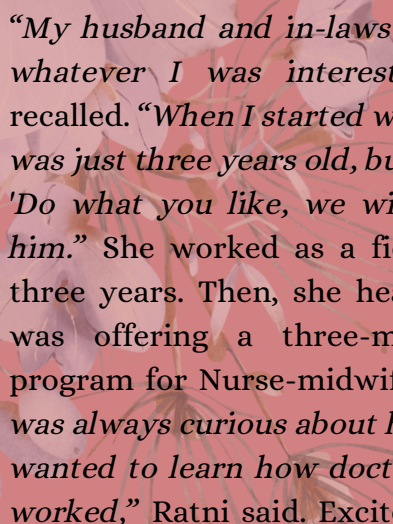
STORY OF A NURSE-MIDWIFE: FROM DREAMS TO ACCOMPLISHMENT



“I like helping people, everyone nearby knows me. It gives me a sense of purpose – lagta hai life me kuch kar rhi hu,” said Ratni Meghwal, a 31-year-old nurse midwife. Ratni has been working with Action Research and Training for Health (ARTH), a non-profit organization based in Udaipur that also operates three rural health centers. She has been associated with ARTH as a Nurse-midwife for the past three years.

Ratni grew up in a difficult family environment. She had three older brothers and a younger sister, but her childhood was marked by her parents' frequent fights. *“When I was child, I had to travel to my uncle’s place every now and then because of the fights,”* she recalls. Despite these struggles, she studied up to the 9th grade. However, due to family pressure and financial instability, she was married to a man from Lakhmawaton ka Guda, a village 20 km away, where one of ARTH’s health center is located.

Since childhood, Ratni wanted to study more. She felt sad when she had to leave school. But her husband and in-laws turned out to be very supportive. A year after marriage, when she moved in with them, her father-in-law asked if she wanted to continue her studies. *“He told me, ‘You can study as much as you want. We will never stop you’”*, Ratni remembered. Encouraged by their support, she had enrolled for her 10th-grade exams through private mode. With continued support from her in-laws, she graduated in Arts from a private college. She later joined as a field worker for ARTH’s malnutrition project. Her job was to visit homes of malnourished children, check their weight and make sure they were healthy. This helped her gain confidence in working with people.

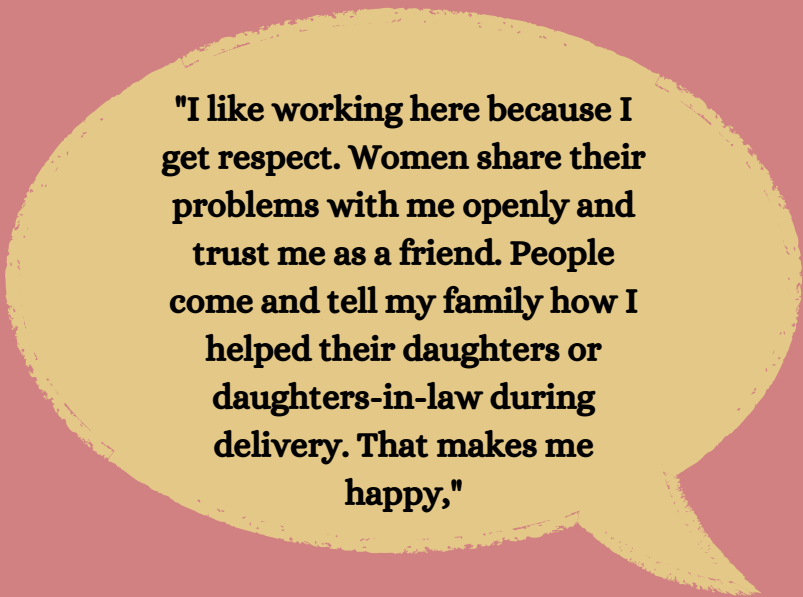


“My husband and in-laws told me to do whatever I was interested in,” Ratni recalled. “When I started working, my son was just three years old, but they told me, ‘Do what you like, we will take care of him.’” She worked as a field worker for three years. Then, she heard that ARTH was offering a three-month training program for Nurse-midwife assistants. “I was always curious about hospital work. I wanted to learn how doctors and nurses worked,” Ratni said. Excited, she applied for the training. Her husband, who works as a Nurse in a government hospital and also in an ambulance, encouraged her. After completing the course, ARTH hired her as a Nurse-midwife assistant because of her good performance.

Her family remained her biggest support system. Her husband said, *“I knew the work shifts involved in a hospital job. I always encouraged Ratni, telling her that this is your time to learn and grow. Do now whatever you can.”* With his support, she decided to study further and enrolled in a General Nursing and Midwifery (GNM) course in Nathdwara, 25 km from home. *“I simply asked my father-in-law if I could study more, and without thinking twice, he paid for my course, travel, and rent,”* she said with gratitude. *“Because of him and my husband, I was able to complete my education. When I was away studying, they took care of our son.”* When asked about the family's view, her husband said, *“She wanted to study, and we supported her. My parents and I took care of our son, and it wasn't too difficult.”*

After finishing her GNM course, Ratni joined ARTH as a Nurse-midwife. Under supervision and support from senior colleagues she quickly improved her skills to conduct deliveries and engage with clients and patients in health center. *“I like working here because I get respect. Women share their problems with me openly and trust me as a friend. People come and tell my family how I helped their daughters or daughters-in-law during delivery. That makes me happy,”* she said with a smile.

Over the years, Ratni feels she has grown both professionally and personally. She recalled, when she first joined, she was hesitant to talk to women and relied heavily on her seniors due to a lack of confidence. However, with hard work, she gained confidence and now can manage the health center and deliveries without supervisory support. Her growth led to her promotion as a Senior Nurse-midwife and were also given In-charge responsibilities at ARTH health center in Lakhmawaton ka Guda. Her husband is proud of her achievements. He said, *“My father passed away a few years ago, but I know he would have been very happy to see her success. He always said, ‘Ratni will do great things in life ‘And she is proving him right. I am very happy for her.”*



“I like working here because I get respect. Women share their problems with me openly and trust me as a friend. People come and tell my family how I helped their daughters or daughters-in-law during delivery. That makes me happy,”



DESTINED TO REACH HER FULL POTENTIAL

Phulwari worker Sajjan shares her transformation from a naïve, uninformed young mother into a dependable and inspiring member of her community.

For the past 4 years, Sajjan Meena has been working as a daycare worker at the phulwari (creche) of Merat phala, a hamlet located inside the Lohagarh panchayat area, part of Pratapgarh district in Rajasthan. The fact that she holds a job now invokes an innocent memory of her childhood when a saint had predicted that she would get a job. Thinking of how skeptical she was then, she says - *“I thought, many people study, but they don't get jobs. Why would I? But he insisted that I study. So, I studied till Class 12th and then got married. Now, when I remember his words, I feel he was right.”*

Sajjan was always interested in work and at one point even insisted on opening a shop for sewing clothes. It was not until three years after her marriage, however, that Sajjan started working formally when she joined BHS. During this time, she also had to face immensely difficult circumstances - *“At the time of my marriage, my husband didn't have a regular job, and even when he did work, it wasn't enough to cover the household expenses. I had to depend on my husband for everything.”*

And then the most painful moment came during her first pregnancy- *“For my first delivery, I went to the Anganwadi, where they vaccinated me just once, and then did nothing. They filled the Mamta card themselves and told me that there was no medicine. At that time, I was very scared, so I couldn't say anything to them, but it was because of their negligence and lack of care that my child could not survive”, Sajjan shares*

It is almost incredible therefore to see how cheerful and optimistic she is in her outlook. Her husband, Dhanraj, attributes this change to her work - *“Earlier, when she used to be at home, she never interacted much with anyone. Now, she is quite approachable. People consult her on health-related matters. She also guides other girls for further studies and work. She doesn't just think about herself, she thinks about the whole community.”*

He goes on to share how Sajjan has become more confident in her own ability to take on any situation - *“Since she has started working, she is healthier than before. She takes good care of herself and also of the family. After my mother passed away, it became quite difficult, but it is amazing how she has handled everything so well.”*

“Earlier, people used to discourage women from working, but now they give my example to their own daughters and daughters-in-law. Even my sister and sister-in-law are studying further to get a job. They want to be able to do what I do.”

Sajjan is aware of the impact her own growth has made in her community and family. *“Earlier, people used to discourage women from working, but now they give my example to their own daughters and daughters-in-law. Even my sister and sister-in-law are studying further to get a job. They want to be able to do what I do.”*

Sajjan acknowledges the supportive role her family has played in this process. While her parents always wanted her to study and work, after marriage, her in-laws have helped her in different capacities. *“My in-laws fully support me with the household chores. When I get up early in the morning to make chapatis, my father-in-law would say, 'You go, I'll do all the work.' He also takes care of our cattle and farm-related work. When I get leaves or on Sundays, I help out.”*



For Dhanraj, supporting Sajjan has also meant learning to ignore what others are saying. *“My friends would say that I am a slave to my wife, but I don't care about that. What matters to me is my family's happiness. We both collectively take decisions in the house. If in order to support her, I have to stay at home, I will stay. In my absence, my father helps out. If he was not there, I would have stayed at home.”*

Sajjan knows the kind of rumours and gossip that people in the village were ready to spread about her. Other women, in fact, questioned her for wanting to work when her husband was already earning. *“They would say, 'what is the need?' and I would say that when we both earn, I can also support my husband. It is mutual.”*, Sajjan recollects.

Today, Sajjan is a known and dependable member of her village community. Along with her commitment towards her work, Sajjan is mindful of her own behavior. Love and kindness are equally important for having cordial relations. Having seen Sajjan realize her own potential, Dhanraj realizes the importance of family support for working women – *“When we trust and support them, they can go far and do anything they want in their life. We should encourage them.”*

EMPHASISING SELF-CARE AS ESSENTIAL TO SERVICE

Drawing from her journey and the hardships she has faced, Shubhangi Kale delivers a different but extremely relevant message on women and care

Born in Mumbai, Maharashtra, and raised in a small village, Shubhangi grew up in a family of four siblings. Her family-owned agricultural land and relied on farming for their livelihood, managing with limited resources.

Shubhangi's childhood was filled with challenges. Her father was the sole breadwinner, and as her older sisters married, she became the pillar of support for her family. With the unwavering encouragement of her parents, she completed her basic education and secured a job at a local health clinic. Her dedication and honesty helped her learn essential clinical skills, and she worked there for two years.

After marrying Mr. Mahendra Kale, she faced another turning point. Her husband's job required him to relocate, but she had to stay back with her in-laws, who were deeply rooted in agriculture. In the early years of marriage, she assisted them with farming. However, her husband supported her ambition to pursue an Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) certification, recognizing her prior experience in healthcare

Unfortunately, during this time, Shubhangi developed retinal displacement, a serious eye condition. Due to their superstitious beliefs, her in-laws misinterpreted her illness as an excuse to avoid farm work. Isolated and distressed, she sought refuge at her maternal home for a few days..

Her mother played a crucial role in uplifting her, offering moral support and encouragement. As time passed, Shubhangi was blessed with a son. When he turned two, she made a bold decision—she enrolled in an ANM course, staying in a hostel for two years to complete her studies. Initially, her in-laws cared for her son, but later, he moved in with her parents, who continue to support him.

After earning her ANM certification, Shubhangi began working in healthcare centers and hospitals, making a significant impact on public health, especially in underserved communities.

In her over seven years of work experience, she has assisted in providing preventive care, early diagnosis, and chronic disease management to the communities in nearby villages of Pune. She has supported pregnant women and encouraged them to attend regular antenatal check-ups (ANC) and seek timely medical care. She continues to advocate for infant and child immunization, ensuring families understand the importance of vaccinations.



She also played a vital role during the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing vaccine hesitancy by providing factual information and ensuring community members received proper healthcare. Understanding the critical gaps in healthcare services, Shubhangi continues to bridge them, ensuring continuous care for her community.

Shubhangi is a dedicated, passionate, and resilient Community Health Nurse. She believes that women hold the strength, perseverance, and nurturing spirit essential to their families and society.

She shares a powerful message of hope, empowerment, and solidarity, reminding women-

"As we care for others, we must also nurture ourselves. Self-care is not a luxury—it is essential for our ability to serve."

"As we care for others, we must also nurture ourselves. Self-care is not a luxury—it is essential for our ability to serve."



Collaborators

