



# POWER UP

STORIES OF EMPOWERMENT POWERED BY HOME-BASED WORKERS

# PREFACE

In September 2019, with support from Comic Relief, HomeNet South Asia and WIEGO collaborated on the Power Up programme. It was designed to create a global movement of home-based workers by strengthening grassroots organisations and leaders, to enable women home-based workers to build increased recognition, representation and ultimately better livelihoods in Africa and South Asia. In South Asia the project focused on Bangladesh, India and Nepal.

Power Up worked by empowering women home-based workers and enabling them to develop key skills required to increase visibility, gain recognition and take transformative action. The foundational pillars of the project included:

- Strengthening the organisational capabilities of home-based workers
- Facilitating improved capacities for leadership
- Increasing their visibility and recognition as a category of workers
- Enhancing solidarity action and present a network for engagement
- Enabling them to build knowledge and raise awareness

**A movement is strong because of its leader.** With this in mind the project has focused on building the capacity and capability of its leaders and creating a cadre of leaders who then inspire and catalyse change at the grassroots level. This cadre of leaders have received training on key issues such as Organising for change, Preventing gender-based violence, Climate Change and mitigation strategies, Communication tools in the digital age, Key instruments like C-177 and C -190 to name a few. They have been part of learning/sharing meetings and exposure visits which have inspired them by the work done in other locations and countries. Equipped with this new knowledge this cadre of leaders have trained and inspired home-based workers in their communities. They have brought about positive changes in the lives of their Home-based worker sisters.

It is with great pleasure that we bring to you this document that showcases the journey of a few of these leaders and the impact that their leadership has had in terms of increasing the visibility of home-based workers, seeking recognition for their work, negotiating for better wages and services and standing up for their rights.

We would like to thank Comic Relief for their crucial support for the last five years which has made this journey and these results possible. We truly appreciate their flexible approach which made it possible to make changes in this journey, especially during the COVID -19 pandemic and their willingness to adapt this programme to support the changing reality in the lives of the home-base workers.

This endeavour would not have been possible without the support and collaboration of WIEGO, who shares our vision of empowering the working poor, especially women. We would like to especially thank Ms. Katia Araujo, Programme Advisor WIEGO, who has been our ally and guide in these last five years and has made this collaboration efficacious.

These results would not have been possible without the dedication and commitment of our affiliates. We would like to acknowledge LIE, CUP, WHR, SAATHI and IASEW for their unwavering efforts to empower Home-based workers.

**Sristi Joshi Malla**  
Regional Coordinator  
HomeNet South Asia

## SHARDA MISHRA

Sharda Mishra, a single woman from Budhanilkantha Municipality, has faced significant challenges in her life, particularly after the death of her husband. She experienced discrimination from her own family – a common plight for many single women in her community. This personal hardship became the driving force behind her determination to uplift other marginalised women, especially home-based workers (HBWs) like herself.

Initially, none of the 13 wards of the Budhanilkantha Municipality had any organised groups representing home-based workers. This meant many workers, especially single women like Sharda, were left vulnerable and marginalised. There was no recognition for the work they did, nor any support for further training or advocacy.

Sharda felt the impact of this very keenly. Her association with the Women for Human Rights (WHR) opened her eyes to the change that was possible – and showed her how she can drive this change herself, by bringing together the HBWs in her community.

She started off by collecting information about single women across all 13 wards of Budhanilkantha. Organising home based workers was a cornerstone of Sharda's vision as a leader. She attended various programs organised by WHR. She made women aware of the potential to sell the products they made at home. Recognising the need for organisation and support, she took the first step by identifying HBWs in each ward and forming a group of HBWs in each ward. Understanding the importance of skill enhancement, Sharda trained herself through various programs organised by Women for Human Rights (WHR). She then passed on this learning to other women in her community.



Sharda saw the need to identify further learning requirements within the community and make that knowledge accessible. She gathered information on the kinds of trainings the women desired. Incense stick making, pickle making, sewing and stitching, and crafting cloth shoes emerged as the skills most in demand. She then collaborated with WHR, Red Cross, and the Budhanilkantha Municipality to organise workshops around these.

She also consistently encouraged women to learn the value of their own skills in the market, rather than giving away their labour as gifts – something that she herself used to do before. This set them on the path of being rightfully recognised as skilled workers capable of contributing to the economy.

Perhaps most importantly, Sharda leadership had a significant impact on policy and institutional support for single women and HBWs in Budhanilkantha. She successfully mobilised women from all 13 wards to sign a letter outlining a need for separate allowances for this community. This eventually resulted in the municipality allocating a budget for single women from the fiscal year 2021/22 onwards.

Sharda also played a vital role in raising awareness about the violence faced by single women and HBWs. Her efforts educated these women about their rights and about where to seek help. It also made the local government more aware of these issues, resulting in increased recognition and support.

Sharda's contributions as a leader in the Budhanilkantha Municipality exemplifies the power of grassroots mobilisation and empowerment. Through her dedication, she has transformed the lives of around 250 women in her locality, helping them to stand up for themselves and their rights. Her story goes to show how a single individual can foster community-wide change, with the right support and knowledge.

## LAIJU AKTER

A 30-year-old home-based worker (HBW) from the Jatrabari cluster in Dhaka, Laiju Akter has transformed her life and the lives of countless others through her unwavering determination and leadership.

Starting as a ball press worker in the garment accessories industry, Laiju's early life was filled with challenges. She dropped out of school in eighth grade, married young, and soon faced violence and abuse from her husband. Left as a single mother after her divorce, with a young daughter to care for, Laiju faced severe financial and social challenges. However, her story was just beginning.

In 2013, Laiju joined the Coalition of the Urban Poor (CUP) as a home-based worker group member and a volunteer for the Bangladesh Organization for Social Change (BOSC). This decision marked the beginning of her transformative journey. Laiju received extensive training from CUP and its partners, including the OSHE Foundation. She learned about leadership, gender-based violence prevention, and organising for social change, which empowered her to step into the role of a cluster leader.

Despite the hardships she faced, Laiju's leadership skills flourished. Not only did she continue working as a ball press operator, but she also returned to her education, eventually completing her degree. Today, she is happily remarried to a supportive husband, raising her daughter from her first marriage in a stable and loving home.

As the cluster leader of Jatrabari, Laiju now leads over 1,000 home-based workers. Many of them are young women facing harassment and violence at work and home. Still, Laiju's leadership (particularly in her efforts to combat violence and establish the rights of home-based workers) has profoundly impacted her community.

One of Laiju's most significant achievements is establishing a Violence Against Women (VAW) committee in her cluster. Through this committee, Laiju and her team work tirelessly to prevent early marriages and respond to incidents of violence against women home-based workers. They take immediate



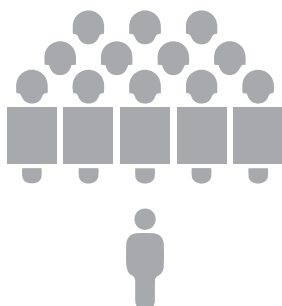
action when violence occurs, providing support through legal aid, engaging with the police, and collaborating with NGOs like Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) and Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST). Laiju has become a trusted advocate for victims, ensuring their voices are heard and justice is served.

Laiju is also a powerful advocate for improving working conditions for home-based workers. She has successfully lobbied factory owners in the ball press industry for better wages, regular work, maternity leave, and improved sanitation facilities for women workers. Her efforts have led to installing toilets in several factories, significantly reducing workplace harassment and violence.

Laiju's work extends beyond her cluster. As a grassroots master trainer, she provides training to home-based workers in other areas, helping them organise and establish their networks. She also collaborates with local stakeholders, including health service providers, social service officers, and police stations, to ensure HBW families access essential services like healthcare, safety net programs, and relief aid.

The impact of Laiju's leadership is undeniable. Early marriage has been almost entirely eradicated in the Jatrabari area, and workplace harassment and violence have decreased significantly. Women workers are now receiving regular pay, and local stakeholders, from factory owners to community leaders, have developed a deep respect for Laiju and her team. Her ability to build solid relationships and mediate conflicts has earned her widespread recognition as a true change-maker.

Laiju Akter's story is one of triumph over adversity, but more importantly, it is a story of empowerment.



## PAYALBEN HITESHBHAI RANAT

Payalben Hiteshbhai Ranat, a home-based worker from Isanpur, Ahmedabad, truly embodies the phrase, "Be the change you wish to see."

Coming from a low-income family, Payalben's professional fate seemed to be sealed when she was forced to leave school after the 10th grade. She took on various odd jobs to support her family financially, like saree packing and working as a peon. While these helped her make ends meet, they never got her out of financial straits.

Payalben got married at 21 – adding household responsibilities, childcare, and the financial burden of supporting her in-laws to her already demanding life. It was during this challenging time that she was introduced to dandiya decoration as a home-based profession.

Until this time, Payalben's focus had been to help provide for her own family. But her involvement with the IASEW (especially through the Power Up project facilitated by HNSA and WIEGO and supported by Comic Relief) would change all that – and shuttle her to the role of a community leader.

The training programs by IASEW empowered her with organising and leadership skills. This had a direct impact on her work – she was able to negotiate better working conditions for herself. Not satisfied with just her own progress, Payalben started organising other home-based workers too. Those within the shirt packing industry are particularly grateful to her – thanks to Payalben's guidance, they were able to secure timely payments from traders.



She also played a pivotal role in transitioning many of these workers into dandiya production – where work was more stable and payments more reliable.

The gender-based violence awareness training was another crucial turning point for Payalben. The knowledge she received equipped her to address domestic violence within her community. She successfully intervened in a domestic violence case in her neighbourhood, helping a woman stand up for herself. Her positive influence in this and similar cases has earned her the respect and trust of her community, elevating her to a leadership role.

Now, at age 38, Payalben continues to work tirelessly to improve the lives of women in her community – be it by assisting them in opening SEWA Bank accounts or encouraging participation in training programs like the ones that transformed her life.

And her impact goes beyond just these practical matters! She is helping her community break out of age-old mindsets too. It's thanks to her interventions that the women in her locality are going beyond the traditional clothes and embracing modern attire – and that young boys are taking a greater part in household chores. With her dedication, Payalben is creating a brighter future for herself and those around her.



## NISHA SAPKOTA

As a community leader from a small settlement in Nepal, Nisha Sapkota's boldest move was to take a glass of dirty water to the drinking water office in her district, demanding to know if the officials there would drink it.

This was a far cry from how Nisha used to be. Timid and soft-spoken, Nisha was once apprehensive about speaking up in public. As a home-based worker, it all changed when Nisha joined Saathi's training under the Power Up project facilitated by HNSA and WIEGO and supported by Comic Relief. She and her peers received various kinds of training under this – from developing their skills to undertaking empowerment and personal development sessions.

This nurtured her confidence and eventually empowered Nisha to evolve into a strong, influential leader in her community. She went on to start important initiatives – like forming a savings and credit group for women home-based workers. She also joined the cooperative steering committee as well as a government committee that worked to eliminate violence against children. As a leader today, Nisha conducts training for the women in her community on topics like violence, climate change and on their rights.

Her skills and confidence came in handy when the water source of their settlement was compromised, and they started receiving dirty water from the tap. They complained to the drinking water office – but were initially dismissed. The officials told them that the water was coming from a natural source and that



there was nothing they could do about it.

With the issue persisting, Nisha and her group eventually marched into the office with a glass of the dirty water for the officials to drink if they thought it was really potable. Seeing the quality of the water, they refused to drink it themselves – and finally gave in to the demands of Nisha and her community.

The water tank was immediately cleaned, and clean water provided to every house. What's more – earlier, all the 30 households in the community had to source their water from one common tap. After this incident, individual taps were installed in every house.

Nisha's story goes to show how without knowledge and empowerment, entire communities suffer. However, with the right support, determined individuals like Nisha can stand up and demand the basic amenities that are their right.



## FARZANA

In the heart of Pallabi, a new change is being brought about by an energetic, resilient 30-year-old woman named Farzana. Once an invisible figure in her community, she has become a respectable leader and mentor for the 130+ women in her group within her organisation. Indeed, her story is the best example of how training, skills development, and cooperative action can change lives.

Farzana joined the Pallabi Cooperative Society Cottage Industry Limited in 2008 and has actively empowered her community. Being a home-based worker, she has faced many of the challenges that other women face – they are discriminated against, paid in arrears, and have no voice to raise these issues within their society. However, with the proper support and training, she broke free from the conventional constraints and not only changed her own life but also helped build the lives of hundreds of other women fighting for themselves.

"I have always believed that if we want to grow, we have to learn and share," says Farzana. "That's why I have dedicated myself to passing on the knowledge I have gained to others."

For Farzana, training programs have been a milestone in her life. Through LIE and HNSA, she has received training in various skill-building exercises. These trainings not only touched upon the more basic technical skills, such as embroidery – but also covered deeper issues like gender-based violence, digital literacy, and how to negotiate in business.

"As someone who did not know how to use digital tools before the training, to hold a Zoom meeting was unimaginable," says Farzana. "Now we use Zoom for meetings and even do all our businesses online."

One significant change Farzana and her fellow home-based workers have witnessed is their dealings with middlemen. Previously, exploitative middlemen would delay payments for embroidery and other work for weeks and months. Individual women in the community felt they had no power against these exploitations as raising issues would cost them future work.

All this changed when they received training in wage negotiation and collective bargaining. They were taught to stand in one voice and speak out as a group, amplifying their voices.



"When we stood alone, nobody paid heed to us. But when we all stood up together, they had no choice but to listen," Farzana says. "Now, we demand to be paid within 30 days, and they obey. It is respect earned through collective action."

Here has also been a palpable change in the treatment of women within the community. Farzana explained that earlier, women were dismissed and their contributions under-valued. However, after training, many changes occurred as their cooperation grew stronger.

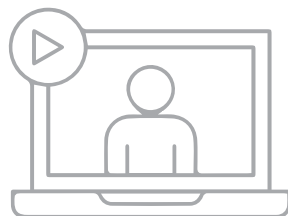
"Now, when we walk through our community, people respect us," Farzana beams proudly. "They know that we contribute – in terms of what we bring in, but as people, too." This respect isn't just a consequence of new skills but also that influx of confidence because they have their group behind them and organisations like LIE and HNSA to back them up.

During the last couple of years, under Farzana's leadership, the Pallabi Cooperative Society Cottage Industry Limited, Sylhet camp has increased its members to 130, who all value the knowledge and skills achieved from the training.

She is passionate about the future of the cooperative, seeing expansion into even greater numbers and greater collective strength. "I hope that people come to realise how strong the power of knowledge is and come aboard. Together, we can grow and succeed in every form."

The world without Zoom meetings was different for Farzana and her team.

Farzana shares how this has made women come under an expanded network, more exposure, and modern business methods. "We relied on face-to-face connections," she shares. "Now we can connect with others through digital means. This makes us feel more empowered and connected."



## RASHIDA AKHTAR NIPA

In the charming city of Sylhet, Bangladesh, lives a woman known to be soft-spoken yet doggedly determined. She is involved with her organisation, Labour at Informal Economy (LIE). As a leader of her group Swanirbhor Karmojibi Nari Unnayan Somiti, she helps women fight for recognition and fair wages through the labour market. Her name is Rashida Akhtar Nipa.

Rashida began her career as a community leader with a simple observation. On visiting Dhaka, she observed that women there received specialised training designed for their empowerment. This opportunity was far removed from what women in Sylhet are used to. Rashida saw the potential of such programs for improving women's lives and knew immediately that her community could benefit from such initiatives too.

First of all, she reached out to the training officials in Dhaka. After receiving knowledge about the training and the available facilities, she was advised to contact the government's Women Empowerment Cell in her hometown of Sylhet to arrange similar training programs there. She reached out to LIE officials who advised her to first organise and bring together a few women in her community for a training session. Rashida set out to Sylhet with an ambitious plan of mobilising women in her locality.

Doing this was easier said than done. Rashida first had to overcome the barriers of traditional gender norms that were deeply embedded in her society. Her mother-in-law initially forbade her to work with any group, thinking she'd be working with men. It was only when Rashida showed her the videos from previous all-women trainings, that her mother-in-law agreed to it.

Rashida wore her burkha and covered her head with an umbrella as she went from door to door to mobilise women. She initially faced scepticism. The women in that locality usually do not go outside the home, so they questioned what they'd really get out of the engagement.



Rashida patiently explained how officially registering as a group would get them access to fair wages and skill training for the work that they were already doing from home. She also talked about the government schemes that they'd be eligible for. Eventually, 15 women agreed to join in for an initial meeting.

Rashida coordinated with LIE to conduct that meeting. The meeting was so impactful and informative that the women crowded around Rashida and hugged her once it was over! They told her that they had only been familiar with cooking and a life inside the home – now they were cognizant of the opportunities open to them.

Together, 20 of these women formed a self-help group and Rashida arranged for more training sessions from LIE and the Women's Empowerment Cell. The women all contributed 20 Taka as a seed fund. As the group became more empowered and the members started realising the benefits, they came up to Rashida themselves and asked her to increase the fees – with some even agreeing to pay 500 Taka! Eventually, they settled on 100 Taka as the fees.

Now over time, the group has grown in size too – from the 20 initial members to 175+ today. They are trained in various skills like sewing, embroidery, beadwork and more. Thanks to digital skills training, they have also learned how to sell their products online. As their leader, Rashida hopes to expand the group even further. Her face lights up as she talks about the next milestone – that of becoming 500-members strong one day!

## HENA AKHTER RUPA

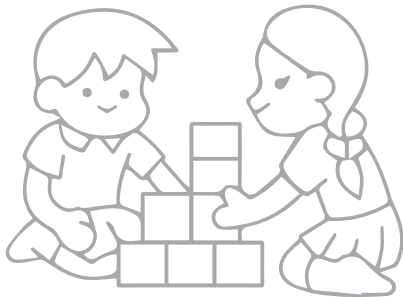
Hena Akhter Rupa, a 29-year-old grassroots leader from Hazaribagh, Dhaka, has been deeply involved in her community's struggles. Her mother was a central leader of the slum federation, and Rupa's journey as a leader of home-based workers (HBWs) began when she became part of the Coalition of the Urban Poor (CUP) as an adolescent.

At 16, Rupa's education was cut short by an early marriage, a common occurrence in her community. However, her resolve to continue her education remained unwavering. Despite the challenges of being a young mother to two children, Rupa resumed her studies. She began working as a home-based worker, which allowed her to support her family financially while contributing to her community.

Rupa's involvement with CUP deepened over the years. She participated in various training sessions supported by the HomeNet South Asia (HNSA), including leadership, gender-based violence prevention, and skill development programs. These opportunities helped her grow from an HBW group member to a cluster leader for the Jatrabari area. Today, she is a grassroots trainer, an entrepreneur specialising in block batik printing and handicrafts, and a central leader in the HBW movement in Bangladesh.

Her work is not just limited to her business ventures. Rupa has become an advocate and organiser for HBWs, helping over 500 workers organise and empowering another 500 to join the movement. She also actively participates in national and international forums, raising her voice for the rights of HBWs.

Rupa's most significant contribution has been establishing a community-based daycare service for HBW mothers in her cluster. In 2023, recognising the need for childcare support, she collaborated with local leaders and the slum federation to create a centre that allows HBW mothers to work while their children are cared for.



In addition, Rupa has been instrumental in preventing early marriages and supporting victims of violence. She and other cluster leaders actively raise awareness and take action to combat gender-based violence in their community. Her efforts extend beyond immediate crisis intervention – she has established referral linkages with health service centres, birth registration offices, and social safety net services to ensure that HBW families receive the support they need.

Rupa's dedication to education extends to future generations as well. She helped motivate a local organisation to establish a preschool centre for HBW children, which has since been linked to formal schooling, ensuring a better future for them.

Despite her challenges, including balancing her role as a mother, wife, entrepreneur, and community leader, Rupa continues to push boundaries. Her husband, also a home-based worker specialising in digital printing, supports her work, and they contribute to their family's livelihood.

Over the last five years, Rupa's involvement with the Power Up program, facilitated by HNSA and WIEGO and supported by Comic Relief, has further enhanced her skills and confidence, empowering her to take on even more responsibilities within the HBW community. She is now recognised as a skilled leader, capable of representing HBWs on national and international platforms.

Hena Akhter Rupa's journey is a testament to the power of community, education, and resilience. Her unwavering commitment to improving the lives of home-based workers in Bangladesh has made her a beacon of hope and a powerful advocate for justice and equality.

## BINU MAHARJAN

There was a time when Binu Maharjan would not even be able to introduce herself without breaking down in tears. Looking at the hardships she has faced in life, it's easy to see why her confidence was so shaken. So how did Binu go from there to becoming the president of the home-based workers' group in Ward 27 of Sunakothi?

Born into a modest family in Sunakothi, Lalitpur - Nepal, Binu eloped at the age of 24. With an education only up to 8th standard, she did not have many career paths open. She initially focused on her family, giving birth to her daughter and son. But her challenges were just beginning.

When pregnant with her first child, Binu suffered from a prolonged bout of jaundice. Her daughter was born prematurely at 7 months, necessitating a month-long hospital stay. Struggling to pay the bills, Binu opened a small grocery and cosmetic shop once she was well enough. When this venture failed, she opened a street food stall, while her husband worked in a marketing office. Unfortunately, both businesses incurred losses, leaving the family in severe financial distress.

As if these challenges weren't enough, Binu's father passed away, followed closely by her sister Sabita's husband. Reeling from emotional and financial upheaval, the family struggled to see light at the end of the tunnel.

Their turning point came when Binu's sister Sabita got introduced to Women for Human Rights (WHR), later becoming the district president of Lalitpur. Through her, Binu was introduced to WHR too.

Attending WHR's legal awareness, psychosocial counselling, gender violence, and climate change training programs changed Binu's life. Equipped with the right knowledge, she engaged in various home-based income-generating activities like making incense, puffed rice, dolls, cushions, tailoring, velvet shoes, and bangles, often fulfilling orders from various organisations as part of a group.



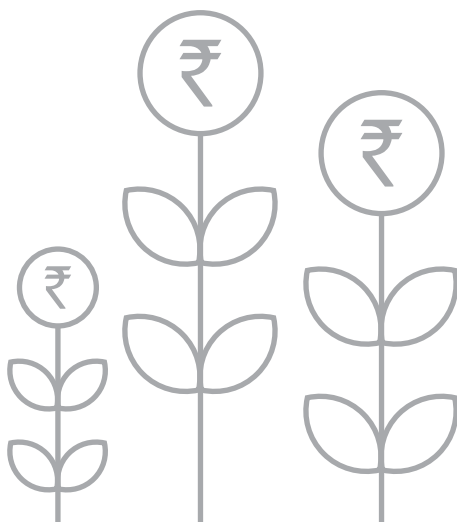
As her life improved, Binu began to understand the importance of unity, collective identity, and self-advocacy. In July 2012, she took on a leadership role as the president of the home-based workers' group in Ward 27 of Sunakothi, Lalitpur Metropolitan City.

Under her leadership, the group expanded from 14 to 81 members today. They engage in various income-generating activities – like agriculture, pickle making, liquid soap production, incense stick making, sweater knitting, embroidery, sewing, and carpet-making from hay. This has contributed to their journey of financial independence – even being able to purchase soap and other household requirements with their own money gives them a taste of success. Moreover, seeing their tangible growth, other workers join the group too.

WHR's caretaker training program opened yet another door for Binu. After completing the program and training under a physiotherapist from Vayodhya Hospital, Binu's skills caught the eye of the authorities at the hospital where she worked as a cleaning staff member. There were no physiotherapists at the hospital, and Binu's impressive skills got her a job on the spot. Today, she works as a physiotherapist at Swostik Health Care Center, earning a good monthly income. She also provides home visits to patients, earning both good remuneration and respect.

Binu continues to advocate for the rights and opportunities of the 81 HBWs in her locality, remaining committed to their empowerment. Aside from facilitating new opportunities, Binu also mentors many women in her community – building their confidence and encouraging them to assert their voice. Binu's mother-in-law and daughter are also active members of this group, reflecting the generational impact of her leadership.

Her transformation from a struggling home-based worker to a respected community leader has been extraordinary – and it is all due to her resilience, determination and a strong sense of community responsibility.



## SMRITI AKTER SUMI

Smriti Akter Sumi, a 24-year-old member of the Mirpur Pallabi Women's Cooperative, is part of a remarkable group of 300 women within her organisation, dedicated to preserving their cultural heritage while forging new paths for the future. The cooperative specialises in traditional handicrafts, including weaving clothes and sarees, with skills passed down through generations. Beyond its business operations, the cooperative serves as a space where women unite, support each other, and grow personally and professionally. Each handcrafted item they create represents the resilience and strength of their community.

Their journey toward empowerment began in 2008 with a partnership with the OSHE Foundation/ LIE. This organisation provided essential training not only to enhance their craft but also to equip them to face gender-based challenges. These sessions helped the women understand their rights, enabling them to protect one another and create a safe environment where they could thrive as artisans and individuals.

A pivotal moment came in 2021 when Smriti was offered the opportunity to participate in a digital skills training session organised by HNSA. This training was conducted via Zoom and opened up a world of possibilities that had previously seemed out of reach. The idea of selling handmade products online had always been a distant dream. Still, with the newfound skills, Smriti and her peers learned to navigate platforms like Facebook and Instagram, showcasing their work and expanding their reach beyond local markets.

This digital training couldn't have come at a better time. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the cooperative's sales dropped dramatically, and the fear of losing their livelihoods became real. The digital skills Smriti had acquired became their lifeline. She set up an online presence for her small business, and slowly, sales began to trickle in. These skills saved her business and helped support her family during an uncertain time.

Like many success stories, the cooperative faced its share of challenges. One particularly troubling moment occurred when a younger member became the target of exploitation by a middleman who would call her to his home on the pretext of discussing some work-related requirements, and then behave inappropriately with her. Uncomfortable with such behaviour, the girl opened up to her group. The cooperative banded together to confront the man,



clarifying that they would not allow anyone in their group to be taken advantage of. The middleman initially tried to sweep it under the carpet, saying that the girl had been free with him too. But supported by the group, the young girl stood her ground. Faced with the collective strength of the women, the man quickly apologised. This incident reinforced an important truth: while individuals may struggle to fight injustice, unity makes them unstoppable.

The lesson of unity has defined everything the cooperative does. They are stronger together, whether growing their businesses or standing up against exploitation. For Smriti, the digital skills training was not just about learning how to promote their products but about opening new doors and realising their capacity to adapt, innovate, and succeed in the modern world. These tools, combined with the strength of their community, have empowered them to face adversity with resilience.

Smriti remains deeply grateful to the OSHE Foundation, LIE, and HNSA for their unwavering support. These organisations have done more than just increase sales or help them navigate the digital landscape; they have transformed the women's lives in the cooperative. They've empowered them to confront challenges head-on, from navigating business hardships to standing firm against injustice. The confidence gained through these experiences has reinforced their belief that no matter what obstacles lie ahead, they can overcome them—because they are not alone.

As the cooperative looks toward the future, it is clear that their journey of empowerment is far from over. The skills they've acquired, the unity they've built, and the resilience they've cultivated will continue to guide them. They are not just artisans but businesswomen, leaders, and advocates. They represent the voices of those who have been silenced for too long. With each new challenge, they will stand together, knowing that the strength of their collective is far greater than any obstacle in their path.



## SHAMIMA AKTER

Shamima Akter, a 28-year-old leader, has spent the last three years at the helm of the Pallabi Cooperative Society Cottage Industry, where she has led a collective of 20 dedicated home-based workers (HBWs) under her, as a group within the organisation. Her story, however, is not just about personal achievement; it reflects the collective strength of women coming together to overcome challenges and fight for their rights.

Growing up, Shamima witnessed the quiet yet crucial work of HBWs, primarily women, who contributed significantly to the economy without any recognition. These women, including her family members, skillfully crafted intricate items, yet their contributions were invisible. Their struggles were unnoticed, and their voices were unheard. For a long time, it seemed this would be their reality forever.

That all changed when Shamima became part of the Pallabi Cooperative Society. Joining the cooperative was more than just finding a place to work—it was about finding a community. The cooperative gave these women a sisterhood that offered support, strength, and, most importantly, knowledge. Through Leadership in Empowerment (LIE) training, Shamima and her fellow members learned about their rights as HBWs. These laws had been in place, yet none of the women knew they existed. With this newfound knowledge, they realised they no longer had to endure exploitation or abuse—they had rights, and it was time to demand them.

One powerful example of their collective strength came from an incident in the community. A man had been abusing his wife, and the violence was often brushed aside as a "private matter" in the name of family dignity. But after receiving their training, Shamima and the cooperative members could no longer stand by in silence. When the abuse continued, they decided to act.

Together, they confronted the man, warning him that if the abuse didn't stop, they would file a formal complaint with the police. Their threat was not empty—they were prepared to go to court if necessary. To their surprise, the community elders, who had previously remained silent on such issues, stood with them. They even threatened to rise against the man if he didn't change his ways.



That confrontation marked a turning point. The man stopped his abusive behaviour, not just out of fear, but because he finally understood the strength of the women's unity. He began treating his wife with respect, something no one expected. This wasn't just a victory for the abused woman—it was a victory for the entire community. It proved that change was possible when women stood together.

However, the cooperative's efforts didn't stop at preventing violence. As HBWs, they constantly faced exploitation from middlemen—delays in payments, undervaluing their labour, and being treated as though they had no power. In the past, they had no choice but to accept whatever was given. But now, things were different. Shamima and her fellow members knew the worth of their work, and they demanded fair and timely pay. It was no longer just about survival—it was about dignity.

Whenever the cooperative members spoke out, they weren't just advocating for themselves. They spoke on behalf of all women who were still too afraid to raise their voices. They were paving the way for the next generation of HBWs, ensuring that they would not have to suffer in silence. With every act of courage, they created a future where women no longer had to sit in the shadows, accepting mistreatment as their fate.

Shamima reflects on her time with the Pallabi Cooperative and sees how far they've come—in terms of financial stability and emotional and mental growth. These women are no longer invisible. They have become leaders, advocates, and changemakers. They are the ones standing up for their community, ensuring that every woman knows her worth and her rights.

Shamima is deeply grateful to the organisations that have supported them along the way. These groups have given the cooperative the tools, knowledge, and confidence to stand together and fight for justice in their homes or workplaces. With this support, their progress was possible.

As she looks toward the future of the cooperative, Shamima holds on to one unwavering belief: when women stand united, no force on earth can silence them. The fight for fair wages, respect, and safety will continue because these women are strong—and they are in it together.



## CHAMPABEN RAVAT

When Champaben Ravat first came home with a bag of scrap waste to repurpose, she could not have imagined her future as a leader of her community.

Born into a struggling farming family in the village of Maliya, Mehsana, Champaben faced economic hardships from an early age. The prospect of higher education was out of reach from the very beginning. Even the 15-rupee cost of just commuting to college one way was an unimaginable expense for their family of nine. So Champaben had to abandon her educational aspirations and take up farming to help make ends meet.

At 22, she got married and moved to Ahmedabad to live with her in-laws. Unfortunately, her financial struggles didn't improve. Faced with the ongoing challenge of supporting her family, she became a home-based worker – she would purchase inorganic waste from local shops and repurpose them into purses, bags or pillow covers. This was a turning point in her life.

Champaben's ability to quickly learn new skills and her resourcefulness in this craft soon began to pay off, with her earnings increasing to 2000 rupees a month. This newfound income provided her with a sense of stability and self-sufficiency.

Her involvement with IASEW was another significant pivotal step. It introduced Champaben to various training programs that equipped her with new skills and perspectives, enabling her to take on a more active role in her community.



One such program focused on community mobilisation, resource management, and leadership skills. It expanded her horizons beyond her immediate work – and soon she started her own group meetings to address issues within her community. From helping other women open bank accounts to guiding them to access financial services and government schemes, her impact was huge!

Another training on gender-based violence awareness led to tangible results. Armed with the right skills and knowledge, Champaben successfully intervened to help a neighbour facing domestic issues. This incident reinforced her reputation as a trusted figure of support against violence in her community.

Sustainability has always been an important aspect of Champaben's work. However, after receiving training on Environmental Action Through Climate Change, she became even more dedicated to sustainable practices – be it by making disposable bowls and plates from leaves, repurposing waste materials into useful household items or learning to grow her own vegetables. Her efforts had a noticeable impact, with many in her community learning how to cut down plastic or water wastage, inspired by her.

Today, Champaben is a recognised leader, advocating for more women to participate in training programs and empowering them to tackle their own challenges. Her leadership has created a ripple effect, inspiring others in her community to pursue sustainability and improve their lives.

Security and financial stability has touched Champaben's own family too. After 16 years of hard work, she and her husband purchased their own 1BHK house as joint partners – cementing her role as a self-sufficient leader of tomorrow.



## DIL LAXMI PRAJAPATI

Dil Laxmi Prajapati's life was touched by tragedy 22 years ago, with the death of her husband. As per the norms of traditional society, she returned to her parental home in Bode, Bhaktapur, and adopted the austere life of widowhood.

That's where her tale could have ended – but the right support, education, and advocacy empowered her to write a different story for herself. Dil Laxmi was introduced to Women for Human Rights (WHR) when a friend referred her to their program for single women in Bhaktapur. Surrounded by women who shared similar experiences, Dil Laxmi found solace, strength and a platform to express her emotions. Soon, WHR became her safe space.

She started participating in various trainings that equipped her with knowledge on women's rights, gender equality, family violence, and climate change. Bolstered by her new-found confidence and self-assurance, she registered an organisation of her own – one that would create a support system for other single women in her locality.

Dil Laxmi went on to play a crucial role in raising awareness about the legal rights of single women. Her advocacy has empowered many women in her community to fight for their rightful inheritance, settle property disputes, and stand up against familial and societal pressure.

Through WHR, she also became aware of the issues faced by home-based workers (HBWs) and became involved with Homenet South Asia (HNSA). She went house to house, to collect data on HBWs in her community.

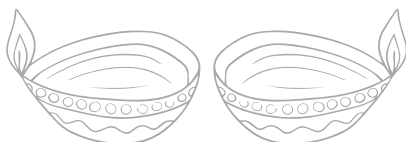


She played an essential role in educating these women about their identity as home-based workers, the recognition they should receive for their work, and the kind of outcomes they can drive with the skills that they possess. She proactively addressed gender violence within her community, especially among home-based workers. She also conducted various awareness and training sessions on the impacts of climate change on HBWs, collaborating with local municipalities to provide practical solutions.

Her influence was not restricted to Nepal alone! She travelled to Ahmedabad, India, learned from HBWs in that region, and brought back the knowledge she gained to her local community. Thanks to her, there has been increased awareness about HBWs at the local government level – and Dil Laxmi continues to push for more substantial recognition and legal rights.

Most recently, she secured a huge order from the local government to produce "pala" (traditional oil lamps), thus providing large-scale employment for HBWs in her community while also preserving traditional crafts. Together with the municipality, she is also teaching women how to create various clay items, opening doors to new economic opportunities.

Dil Laxmi turned what could have been a tale of tragedy and grief into a story of hope that not only empowered her – but also elevated the lives of many single women and HBWs. Supported by WHR and HNSA, her work continues to inspire others and highlights the importance of grassroots leadership in driving social change.





With support from:



**LIAISON OFFICE**

Flat No. 709, Indraprakash Bldg., 21,  
Barakhamba Road, New Delhi - 110001, India

**REGISTERED OFFICE**

Rogers House  
5, President John Kennedy Street  
Port Louis, Mauritius  
Email: [contact@hnsa.org.in](mailto:contact@hnsa.org.in)

 HomeNet South Asia

 HomeNet South Asia Trust

 HomeNet\_SouthAsia

 @HomeNet \_SAsia

 @homenetsouthasiatrust

 [hnsa.org.in](http://hnsa.org.in)