

Warm greetings to all!

World Humanitarian Day is celebrated every year on the 19th of August to advocate for the survival, well-being and dignity of people affected by crisis. A grave humanitarian crisis in today's time is violence and abuse against women, especially single women. Lali Dhakad, CII Foundation Woman Exemplar from Rajasthan survived the ordeal of child marriage, violence and widowhood at a very young age, and has been advocating for the rights of single women since the last 33 years.

Married at the age of 2 in something called a 'kachhi marriage', Lali was sent to her husband's home at age 10, forced to face the trials of a conjugal life. Soon after she contracted polio, a disability that invited mockery and violence from her husband and in-laws. These tribulations were compounded when her husband remarried and Lali had to take on the role of a caretaker for the step-children. At the age of 15-16, she became a widow subjected to a life of purdah and isolation with offensive jibes whenever she stepped out. As a child of 16, when neglect, violence and abuse became an everyday event it took a toll on Lali physically leading to mental breakdown. Every time Lali went out for work or to meet anyone, she had to hear scathing remarks and face backlash from her in-laws. Harassment reached a hilt when her in-laws labelled her as a prostitute and lodged a false case against her for having an extramarital affair and the community began hunting her down for witchcraft.

Dejected, Lali decided to reach out to the district women grievance cell, from where her journey of finding herself began. Urged by her lawyers to attend a meeting in the district for the rights of single women, Lali went with dwindling hope but was surprised to meet many women who shared the same story as her. This meeting motivated her to work for the rights of single women. She joined the Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan (ENSS) to build a movement of single women across the state.

Recognizing that other single women also face equally trying life experiences, Lali mobilized separated, divorced, abandoned, and single women below the age of 35 years into joining the ENSS, thereby expanding and strengthening the movement's grassroots base. However, these numbers were not enough to push the government to bring changes in policy. Lali worked extensively

with some of these women to increase the numbers and mobilized single women, region wise. She met government officials and politicians to organize state-level consultative meetings. Finally, after multiple consultations, Lali was instrumental in organizing the 2003 state convention on the rights of single women and invited women's rights organizations and community-based organizations from across the state to share their work and experiences. This finally created a policy shift in Rajasthan, where widows could avail pension, irrespective of having children above the age of 18.

It was Lali's expertise, commitment, and empathetic approach towards women that led to ENSS expanding their work to 33 districts and reaching out to more than 60,000 single women. She has made sure that they used their collective power to push for better policy advocacy: a journey that led them to meet union ministers to earmark greater funds for the pension of single women.

Currently Lali, through the ENSS, aims to expand the power of her collective by reaching out to more than 1 lakh women and providing them with intensive leadership, functional literacy, and skill development training to enhance their livelihood and entrepreneurial opportunities.

"For every single woman, widow, separated, unmarried or a woman with disability, economic independence becomes pivotal in her journey of becoming self-reliant and away from abuse. I want to work on uplifting the livelihoods of single women constituting 8.6 % of the female population (Census, 2011) of India."

Send in a line of support for women such as Lali Dhakad. Write to us at

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