

Bhuvanagiri Helpdesk Report

Introduction

The Helpdesk workers and leaders represent a community of itinerant travellers, called the Dommara community, who live a nomadic life, finding different occupations (including handling and managing pastures and domestic animals) in every place that they would settle in briefly. In the village that they would visit, they would set up shacks in secluded areas, play games specific to their traditional ways of life and carry out domestic activities before travelling to a new place.

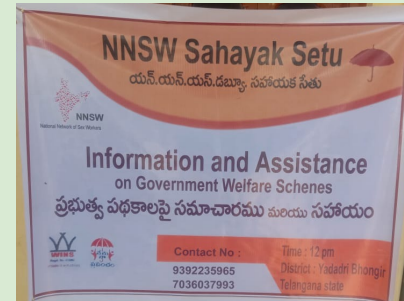
Before being able to set up livelihoods in any village that they would travel to, the Dommara people would have to get approvals from the Sarpanch of the village. The Sarpanch would often not have any reason for objection because of the help that this community would provide local farmers, whose harvest would be richer with the kind of seeds, labour and experience they provided. In exchange, the community would be given some rice for survival. However, most of the time, the Sarpanch would have one condition - the trading of sex work by some women in the community in exchange for approvals.

Among the people of the Dommara Community, sex work is a traditional occupation, undertaken by many women in immediate or earlier generations, but it has never been imposed on any woman. When a woman begins menstruating, she is asked to make a choice between leading a domestic, married life and becoming a sex worker.



Launch of the Helpdesk in November 2020.

Considering the heritage of the community, and the historical preconceived notions about sex work that have always plagued people, Dommara people were ostracised, belittled and socially unacceptable to other peoples. While a politics of convenience would make people active seekers of the sex workers of the Dommara community at night, it would also make them hypocrites belittling and shunning the same people by the morning.



Helpdesk Launch, November 2020.

This is the background of the community in assistance to which the Bhuvanagiri Helpdesk is currently working. The person in conversation is Jyothi from 'The Dommara Rehabilitation and Reformation Society' in Bhongir.

Impact of the Helpdesk (beyond numbers)

When this Helpdesk was started, people would be afraid of coming to her house as she is a member of the Dommara community, because of the stigma attached and associated with them. However, after the launch of the Helpdesk and the instalment of the banner, officials such as the Councillor and Chairman are unafraid of visiting their homes and helping them as equal members of society in times of need. This itself is a very big achievement because before this, there was very little contact between officials and Dommara people. Any help or work that the people wanted to carry out would not be possible without support from or contact with the officials.

For example, there was a lady in our district who died due to cancer. Her husband was an alcoholic, who would continuously beat and ill-treat their two children. It was the Helpdesk that took up this issue, and along with the help of officials such as the Councillor and Chairman, it helped collect some money for the children

and ensured that they were admitted to a safe hostel where they could lead a better life, away from their father, and be educated according to their adolescent needs.



Helpdesk, with the help of officials, raised funds to provide for two children whose mother died of cancer and father was a ruthless alcoholic. They also admitted the children to a care-giving hostel, where they are being educated and nurtured.

Work that the Helpdesk wants to take up

Essentially, because of the support that they received from the establishment of the Helpdesk itself, the leaders of this Helpdesk in Bhuvanagiri wish to stand for Councillor elections themselves and therefore, bridge the gap between people (especially of the Dommara community and other like tribes and communities) and the administration. They wish to represent their community on a larger administrative level and quash the discrimination and disrespect that comes their way.



Another initiative that the Helpdesk took up and impacted people was the distribution of foods and its like among some people in an old age home.

In this way, by making a mark and difference in the executive strata of the district, the leaders and workers

of the Helpdesk wish to learn about the skills involved in bringing about development, and helping in the shaping of lives on a larger level. Thus, they also wish to learn how to speak publicly without feeling conscious and be able to hold their ground without compromise in matters that require such behaviour.

Therefore, administration and executive work are works that the Helpdesk members of Bhuvanagiri are looking forward to taking up. They wish to contribute to their community, as well as the underprivileged.

Skill Development by the Helpdesk

Being from a very underdeveloped area and an especially underdeveloped community, handling personal finances with the help of banks was never something that people of the Dommara community or members of the Help Desk were aware of or adept at. According to the leader of the Help Desk, they did not even have as minimal a thing as a bank account before they started the Help desk with the help of Me and My World and NNSW. Since they had to be answerable to someone and were to account their expenses and income, the leaders opened a joint account in the bank.

In this account, 30 women members of the Help desk contribute one hundred rupees a month in the bank account, which makes up a monthly deposit of three thousand rupees. This contribution is towards a loan eligibility that they would meet if they continued the contribution for ten months, as was communicated to them by a bank official.

Therefore, the establishment of the Help desk has helped a lot of women in understanding money, understanding finances and being responsible for them, which is something that not many before considered.

Along with understanding and knowing financials, women are collectively learning other skills such as stitching and knitting clothes and bags, and preparing other crafts that could be sold in places for some extra income. These skills are a great source of learning and income, and a very important way of bonding among the group of women who are unitedly fighting for a

cause. It strengthens the fight and argument for more representation of women in government jobs, and more inclusion of women from our community.

Therefore, the mere solidarity and company that the Helpdesk has enabled and offered, and the recognition it has gathered, in just a course of six months, has helped the women of our community understand, learn, argue, question and fight.

Challenges faced by the Helpdesk

Whenever the members of the Dommara community go to get or register our Aadhar Cards and/or Ration Cards, they are still constantly made to stand in different queues, away from the remaining crowd. They are constantly overly questioned, for no good reason, about their occupations and sources of income when they visit public offices or get their registrations done.

This kind of stigma that is associated with the caste of the community and its roots is the biggest challenge. The justification that the people of this community constantly have to provide for their existence, their livelihood and lifestyle, their choices, and their actions is overwhelming.

However, the people of this community, because of the solidarity facilitated by the structure of the Helpdesk, have become much more confident about and aware of the illegitimacy of this kind of discrimination. Thus, they have begun to answer back confidently and question the authorities.

Therefore, the challenges thrown by society are slowly being overcome with the help of unflinching support and solidarity offered by the Helpdesk in terms of gathering people who wish to make a change and bringing them together as a united front for a cause.



Telugu newspapers reported on the work of the Helpdesk, who helped orphaned children receive a home with the help of officials.