

Smt. Chennupati Vidya
Recipient of the Award for Development and Welfare
of Women and Children - 2014

Born: June 5, 1934

Being the daughter of Shri Gora and Smt. Saraswathi Gora, who were social reformers all their lives since the freedom movement, Smt. Chennupati Vidya had a streak of social work since her childhood. Her two-years stay in Gandhiji's Sevagram, when she was just 13, only strengthened her resolve to be a social activist for women empowerment, gender equality, and village development. She chose her native Vijayawada as the place for the developmental work following Gandhian principles.

Smt. Vidya was the first member of the women's co-operative. As two-term Member of Parliament-Lok Sabha, she strove to bridge the gap between politics and social work. Through effective use of various government schemes and funds, she successfully tried to enhance the status and dignity of women. Sensitization, mobilization, education, providing livelihood training and opportunities to earn through vocational activities, and encouraging women participation in politics, were the tools she adopted to achieve results.

In 1969, she founded the NGO - Vasavya Mahila Mandali (VMM). The three basic principles that have been guiding the organization are VA-SA-VYA; Vastavikata (reality/truthfulness), Sanghadrushti (social concern/social equity) and Vyaktitvam (individuality/bold initiatives). The basic vision of the organization too is based on attainment of holistic social, economic and political development of women and children, especially the vulnerable.

VMM is a women-led secular, non-government organisation working in 12,880 villages and 308 urban slums in 23 districts of Andhra Pradesh.

Areas of activities include:

- Education for change (training, counseling for children in distress, vulnerable sections etc.)
- Women self-reliance (skill development, thrift, self-help, income generation, counseling etc.)
- Community Health and Nutrition (HIV, Tuberculosis, maternal and child health and nutrition emphasized)

Upliftment and Empowerment

Smt. Chennupati Vidya promoted women thrift groups as a measure to address the domestic economic problems faced by poor women. Skill development programs in tailoring, embroidery, basket-making, type-writing and Ambar Charkha were also introduced.

Smt. Vidya introduced vocational training, income generation and mixed community housing colony (without caste discrimination) programs among Sugali tribes and other backward families. VMM also identified fruit and vegetable vending, milk trading, petty shops, fish selling as viable enterprises.

Smt. Vidya played a pivotal role in federating women self-help forums in the Krishna district. The Krishna District Federation of Mahila Mandals consist of around 400 mahila mandals. Besides micro-financing, it led to increased self reliance and confidence, child education and improved living conditions.

HIV/AIDS Program and Healthcare

In 2000, VMM began addressing, through community leadership, the problem of discrimination and stigma faced by the HIV+ve people. In this context, it presented alternative models that are available.

It facilitated access to existing services provided by government and other NGOs by creating a directory of services available in every district. Through its home and community based care and

support program that spanned a decade, VMM and 17 partner NGOs in Andhra Pradesh directly reaches out to over 48,000 HIV infected and affected persons.

Smt. Vidya not only facilitated health care but provided much needed emotional strength and support to the families. The program also addressed hygiene, nutrition, sexual health, and other diseases.

Some of the other healthcare activities comprise of:

- In 2000, with the help of Vijayawada Municipal Corporation, Pulse polio immunization program reached 32,540 children
- In 2004, with the help of Vijayawada Municipal Corporation, Health Centers for Women attended to over 2,80,000 women
- Since 2008, with the support of the Andhra Pradesh State AIDS Control Society, Mobile Integrated Counseling and Testing Centre has been utilized by over 1,80,000 people

Support Groups and Network

Organizing mass events, group meetings, creation of community support structures, involving the leaders in the community were some of the innovative strategies devised by VMM to mitigate the stigma, discrimination and social exclusion of various sections. Smt. Vidya formed child support group, adult support group, HIV mothers' group. Each of these groups generated a mass movement for community mobilization, and transformation within respective groups.

VMM is networked with hospitals, private bodies, corporate, NGOs for care, rehabilitation, counseling and vocational training of HIV patients. It is emerging as the main nodal agency in the state of Andhra Pradesh working through 64 civil society organizations (CSOs) / NGOs covering all the 23 districts.

In 2008, a Prevention of Mother to Child transmission of HIV program too was initiated which resulted in bringing down the transmission rate from 3 to 1 per cent.

Sensitization of law enforcing departments (such as police) and development departments of the government (such as women and child welfare) was simultaneously executed to check further spread of the disease, arrest trafficking activities and address community-based rehabilitation matters etc.

VMM, under the vision of Smt. Vidya, has steered its course towards community partnership. The programs/projects are carried out on the grassroots level with the help of outreach workers. Each outreach worker teams with 4-5 community volunteers to reach to the community thereby creating a fraternity of self-help and self-cooperation groups.

Vocational Training and Other Services

Since 1969, around 50,000 women and adolescent girls have benefitted through vocational training in tailoring, handloom and embroidery.

For the tribal and underprivileged adolescent girls, VMM conducts a two-year nursing/multipurpose health worker training course. It is a residential course and job placement is assured to the girls. VMM provides the less privileged girls with scholarship support.

To address the problem of women and children in difficult circumstances Vasavya Mahila Mandali established three centres viz. Gora Abhaya Nivas (a short stay home), Swaadhar Home and Women Shelter Home in and around Vijayawada town. Most of the inmates of these centers are either sufferers of domestic problems or social alienation due to disease and despair.

Linkages are also developed with Andhra Pradesh University to build capacity of youth to work on public health and other areas. In 2007, VMM introduced orphans and vulnerable children network. Those affected by AIDS, living with the HIV/AIDS, those living on the streets, victims of trafficking; the abandoned are all part of this network.

Smt. Vidya's vision has

- Touched upon issues related to human rights viz. women reservation, domestic violence and child rights.
- Facilitated eradication of violence, domestic abuse and alcoholism.
- Developed creative workshops, skit / theatre and programs for street children / HIV orphans, and destitute especially young men.
- Inculcated education with moral and ethical values in children thus bringing self-esteem in them.

Over 60 partner NGOs of VMM help in mobilizing the funds, provide technical, organizational and monitoring support.

Today, Smt. Chennupati Vidya and her organization are represented on various regional and national committees and bodies and have undertaken dissemination of organizational learning through research papers. VMM has completed seventeen research projects, released nine training modules, introduced four sets of learning materials and participated in around forty conferences at national and international level. Smt. Chennupati Vidya is represented on twenty four important committees/bodies/organization; at different levels including a few international associations.

Smt. Vidya was honoured at social reformers conference in 1975 for her reformist activities and practices. She is the recipient of Saraswathi Award-1983 (Shikshit Samaj, Delhi); Festive Award-1983 (Telugu Academy, Delhi); Best Women Social Worker-2014 (Andhra Pradesh State Women Commission); Felicitation Yanam Swachhnada Seva Samstha, Pondicherry in 2014; 'Adarsa Manya Mahila-2014' (Telugu Book of Records); 'Professional Excellency in the field of Voluntary Health Services- 2014' (Roots Health Foundation); Recognition by Deutsche Bank showcasing her work in the corporate social responsibility report 2010 'Pass on your passion.'

Smt. Chennupati Vidya symbolizes the advent of women into the field of women empowerment and child rights in 1960s, a decade when it was too early to predict such interventionist drives from the educated young women. She devoted her energy and time to VMM and saw life in complete coherence by bringing in credibility to rural community living.

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