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Winter Story

"Now I am a known face in my Panchayat and a bit popular too," says four-time president Jagatha who is receiving a petition from her constituents. Photo: HRF

JUST FOR YOU

BY GILLIAN SOUTHEY | CWS COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR.

The spread of Covid-19 is reshaping the development story. In the short term, our partners have modified their programmes to meet people's urgent needs for food, water and protection. As soon as they can, they want to get back to the tougher tasks of development. We are supporting the structural change that will improve the treatment of women, help redefine masculinities, and give women and Dalits a say in running local government. Training people to do these tasks fairly is one way to address the causes of poverty as well as its effects.

At times like this, we can see the way all of our partners are helping individuals and families while continuing to push for a fair share for the poorest households. In India where partners Ekta and the Human Rights Foundation work, Covid-19 is spreading rapidly but so is hunger. The stories of Lakshmi and Jagatha show how many more people can get the food they need.

In India's Tamil Nadu state, Lakshmi could not believe her good fortune when a team from Ekta arrived at the door. Barely able to move, she welcomed them inside her tiny home. "We have some food just for you," they said.

The two young women brought food rations, part of Ekta's Covid-19 programme to help older women who had missed out on government assistance because they are not considered a household. One of these women was 86-year-old Lakshmi.



Above: When Lakshmi was given food, she immediately shared her good fortune.

Right: A student at the school Ekta runs, shares the poster she made. Photos: Ekta



Lakshmi lost her husband 50 years ago and then her son drowned when he had a seizure while diving for prawns in the nearby river. A few months later his wife died, leaving Lakshmi only with sadness. To support herself, she worked at the nearby rice mill and looked after a few goats for neighbours. As she grew older, she had to give up her job because of ill-health. Eventually she could not walk or manage the goats. A family she knew from her early days gave her shelter. Neighbours bring water and clean her house. Her only food is the leftovers they give her. If there is none, she drinks water and sleeps.

SHARING HER RATIONS

Her delight in having food and visitors was hard to contain. Immediately she prepared *kanji* or rice porridge with the help of the Ekta team - a food she had not



Panchayat presidents Kirubavathy and Satya are keen to implement the training they have had from the Human Rights Foundation to make sure everyone has the food they need. Photo: HRF

cooked for more than a year. She encouraged them to eat the *kanji* with chutney and dal with her. Very happy to have eaten so well she said the rice and dal will last her three months – because she has eaten so little for so long, her stomach will get upset if she eats more.

FIRST SOAP IN A DECADE

Lakshmi was fascinated by the bathing soap something she has not bought for more than a decade. She bathes one or twice a week in the river but if there is no water, she pours water over herself and soaks the dress in the water. "I will use the soap very carefully," she says, as she wants it to last. "This mask, I think I will not need it but I can give it to these girls who help me on the way to school," she added.

"In this big world, I have no one to help me. But when I think that you have come all this way to help me knowing my need, you are a gift from God. Thanks a lot my dear child".

Expecting to help a poor, vulnerable woman, the volunteers from Ekta were overwhelmed by her grace and dignity. They left with tears in their eyes and the hope that they can continue to support her until her death.

A SEA CHANGE

"The empowerment of women, especially as elected representatives in local self-government, has resulted in a sea change in response to the pandemic... They were able to identify the needs of the community and see that they were addressed much better and faster than the state machinery. Being majority women, even when government funds were not forthcoming, they put in their own savings, and tended to the health and nutrition needs of the community."

Edwin, Human Rights Foundation

Jagatha James only attended school to standard eight, but that has not stopped her being elected president of her local *Panchayat* or council for the fourth time. When first elected, some did not believe she could do the job but now they know better. She attended training programmes run by the Human Rights Foundation for women presidents with the support of her husband. Her confidence grew and she says she follows their advice to make sure the *Panchayat* governs its 8,000 residents fairly.

Her *Panchayat* is in the red zone with a high rate of Covid-19 infections and death. Knowing how dangerous the situation was, Jagatha called on local non-governmental organisations and businesses to provide dry rations, oil, face masks and sanitisers for 3,000 families and migrant labourers unable to work during the two month lockdown.

Many have benefitted from her advocacy and attention to good governance. The whole community now has drinking water, 20 people have title deeds for their land, 1,024 families have received houses from the Slum Clearance Board, 2,500 have been allotted land away from the river and she is working to get them land titles, and 100 veterans have received land.

"Now I am a known face in my *Panchayat* and a bit popular too. People are free to approach me with their issues and problems. I am trying my best to solve their problems," says Jagatha.

Please support our Winter Appeal today.

CWS partners are doing whatever it takes to protect their communities from Covid-19 and the hunger that has come with it. In places like India and Haiti, they are reaching people who have been ignored by government or where there are no resources to help. As Covid-19 continues to spread, communities need food, water, hygiene supplies, and sound medical advice. We need your help to stop these twin viruses from spreading.

\$45

will provide seeds for a small rural community in Haiti.

\$65

will provide a family in Nicaragua with seeds and a hygiene kit containing masks, soap and disinfectant.

\$130

will provide food for an Indian family for another month.

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