

19 million masks, 100,000 liters of sanitizer: How women entrepreneurs in India's hinterland stayed afloat in a collapsing economy

With minimal infrastructure, absence of any manufacturing unit and machines, women entrepreneurs across India's remote villages and districts have scripted a success story, along with a generous dose of grit and determination.

By [Garima Bora](#), ET Online | Updated: June 27, 2020, 02:06PM IST



Fifteen days into the first phase of lockdown, Ranjana Kalshetty, a resident of Dhayari village of Pune district, decided to tweak her jute bag manufacturing business to build face masks. Kalshetty, who became a sole entrepreneur for her jute bag business five years ago, realised the opportunity to capitalise by making face masks at a time when India witnessed a shortage of essential items such as hand sanitizers, PPE kits and masks.

"I expanded my team to 30 women as shutting of businesses meant many women in the village were in need of work and money. I provided them sewing machines, raw material and trained them myself," Kalshetty told ET Digital.

The operation, however, had a rocky start. According to Kalshetty, she wasn't getting quality masks from the women who were new to the task and it took more skill training sessions and time to sew a standard mask. In addition to this, manufacturing masks during lockdown, when people were strictly advised not to venture out of their homes, was not an easy task.

"As people were not allowed to go out or have a public gathering of any sort, the women made the masks in their homes. I would allot time to each woman and visit their homes to collect the masks," she said.

Kalshetty's team was able to manufacture 36,000 masks in a month all the while maintaining social distancing, disinfecting sewing machines and using hand sanitizers. The price of masks ranges from Rs 15-30, depending on the number of layers.

Kalshetty's team is among the many rural women entrepreneurs and Self Help Groups (SHG) in India who have come together to make up for the shortfall of masks, PPE kits and in some areas running community kitchens, delivering essential supplies and monitoring returning migrants for coronavirus. Away from the limelight, from India's remote villages and districts across 27 states, 20,000 SHGs have manufactured over 19 million masks, 50,000 liters of handwash and 100,000 liters of sanitizer in the first month of lockdown, as per a World Bank report.

Leveraging the flexibility of business

Non-profit organizations across the country, in states such as Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, have been engaged in providing skill training, raw materials and access to capital to these SHGs in a bid to help them stay afloat and thrive during the economic crisis caused by the pandemic.

Mann Deshi Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to empower rural women entrepreneurs has trained more than 350 women who produce 15,000 masks daily.

“During the initial phase of lockdown, we found many people in villages and small shops not wearing masks at all as there was acute shortage of it and the prices were surging. This gave us the idea to conduct a virtual training across our women entrepreneurs on how to make masks,” Chetna Gala Sinha, Founder, Mann Deshi Foundation, told ET Digital.

A lot of SHG women who were street vendors or farmers had to shut down their businesses because of no demand. “There was a woman who sewed and sold school uniforms and had received a big order before lockdown. However, the order was soon cancelled since schools and colleges had been shut, which meant the woman suddenly did not know what to do with her business anymore,” Sinha said.



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Not to give up, the woman pivoted from making school uniform to manufacturing mask from March 24 and has since been able to keep her business afloat and thrive. She employed more women in the initiative, training them by sending videos on WhatsApp and ensuring quality control. Similarly, groups of women who ran catering businesses for schools and college canteens began supplying homemade packaged food to housing societies.

“These people are so ready and flexible. These women are changing their means to earn money with time and situations on their own. They are not equipped with huge infrastructure, there are no manufacturing units, there are no big machines at all, they are still producing quality masks,” Sinha said.

The Mann Deshi team helped the women and SHGs gain better cash flow, raw material and equipment required. They had also been disseminating information pertaining to health safety measures and social distancing norms by collaborating with local government officials through radio. Along with safety guidelines, the team had also been helping the women with important contact and home delivery of products.

Not compromising on safety norms

Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), a non-profit, that has been working with the government since 1983 has an outreach of 71,000 SHGs in the country. Soon, as the coronavirus outbreak began in India, on March 16, the PRADAN team collaborating with SHG-led federation of women in Pathargarma block in Jharkhand started awareness camps on how to maintain hygiene during the period, the need to wash hands frequently and refraining from touching the face and nose unnecessarily.

“There is a lot of misinformation and misguidance in the remote areas and people often do not have access to the right information. There are rumors such as the presence of a strange flower in the market from some foreign country and if you smell it, you will get coronavirus,” Souparno Chatterjee, an executive from PRADAN, said.

He added that the concept of social distancing does not exist in rural areas where people often hug each other and work in groups, sitting next to each other. “It was indeed a very difficult scene to make them understand how things should be done. But, once we went into production of masks and hand sanitizers locally, in each of these production units, we ensured the minimum number of people in one field. In each room, 4-5 women would work maintaining an adequate distance between them,” he said.

He added that SHGs used to meet every week, but the meetings were stopped and asked to be done remotely among fewer people.

According to a report by PRADAN, the SHGs in its Bihar team made sanitizers using fermented Mahua flowers, which have high alcohol content and its team in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and West Bengal made three-layered cotton masks. These masks were then supplied to several local government organisations such as banks and panchayat offices.

“About 480 SHGs made over 300,000 masks and about 450 litres of sanitizers were produced in a month. On an average, each woman has been earning Rs 5000 per month, and this is certainly more than whatever amount they were being able to earn to top up their main income,” he said.

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