

A Woman's Empowerment

RDRS
Development
Feature



Kulsum Begum is the Chairperson of the Holokhana Union Federation. She sits at her table, checking an array of papers covering everything from birth registration to fisheries but is happy to take time off to talk about her involvement with RDRS and the changes she in her life.

“Today I am an important person in my Union. Look at the people coming to me, consulting me, asking my advice. Even the TNO (Local Government Officer) invites me to meetings. I conduct the Federation meetings. I don't take all this for granted; it took a lot of determination on my part and support from my family and friends to reach my position today.”

She recalls, “There were many obstacles when I first joined the RDRS group. My own family scolded me for participating in group meetings. When I returned home from a week's training course, my brother wouldn't let me into the house. He was a religious leader and thought it was his duty to punish me; people said I was an immoral woman. But I didn't waver; I told them bluntly: “I'm a poor woman. If you can meet my needs, can provide for my family, I won't go for any training, I won't join any group. Can you do that?”” Having silenced the opposition, Kulsum Begum then explained to them: “I have to fight my poverty. I assure you, my character is spotless. I simply have my family's needs at heart.”

And she has come a long way since then as now it is the community's needs she looks after. “First I was an active Group Member, then I became the Federation cashier, then Vice Chairperson for two terms. Now I am the Chairperson”. In this position, she tells us, “I head the committee against repression of women, I arbitrate, ensure birth registration of the children. But that is not all. I am proud to say that with the efforts of our Federation and others in the area, today this is a dowry-free area. No marriage that takes place here involves any form of dowry. This is quite an achievement. I hope this happens in all RDRS project areas and eventually the rest of the country. I think this is a huge achievement because most oppression takes place because of dowry. I also ensure that all the marriages are registered and work against child marriage. This Federation also has an HIV/AIDS awareness programme.”



She pauses, "There is so much to do but I'm grateful for the support and co-operation I get from those around me. As Chairperson of the Federation, I am a respected member of the society. I don't face problems as a woman. In fact, my position has served to empower other women and sensitise the men." To show how much things have changed, she indicates the smiling bearded religious leader sitting opposite from her "I have the Kazi sahib here. His status as a religious figure has helped with registration of marriages and prevention of hilla marriages. He encourages me and other women to work and believes that men and women have equal rights."

"And our Federation's legal volunteer Abdus Sattar Sarkar works hard raising awareness against child marriage, ensuring birth registration. He keeps an eye open for violence to women's and brings cases to the committee for resolution. The TBAs are also a boon to our community by ensuring the health of the mother and child through safe delivery, but also birth registration."

Thus Kulsum Begum marches on. Her husband runs a fertiliser shop; her two sons go to school; they support her wholeheartedly. "My dream has come true. Not only have I fought the battle against poverty, but as Chairperson of the Federation, I am managing to make a difference to the community around me."

Her next target? "We have accumulated considerable savings and, with assistance from RDRS, we plan to build our own Federation centre. Once that is done, we shall expand our income generating schemes, using RDRS loans." With the determination and zeal of Kulsum Begum, Holokhana union is bound to see progress; the empowerment of one woman, it seems, has made all the difference.