



Feel Good Factor

When Covid leads to aggression



Raashi Anand, founder and CEO of Lakshyam, an NGO

A Delhi-based non-profit is helping victims of domestic violence during the lockdown

By Aasheesh Sharma
in New Delhi

ONE not-so-discernible outcome of the worldwide pandemic and the ensuing lockdown has been the rise in incidents of domestic violence against women. When the mother is vulnerable to aggression, it affects the entire ecosystem around her. This tragic truth inspired social entrepreneur Raashi Anand to put her energies behind tackling this through her NGO.

Even as her organisation works to empower street children and their mothers, the founder and CEO of Lakshyam says working with victims of domestic violence happened organically. "Once the lockdown was announced, we knew we had to arrange food for our communities because most of them are employed in polishing shoes, selling toys on traffic signals, working on construction sites or as ragpickers. Beginning with the objective of organising food, within a few days, we started getting calls

Anand works with families of street children

from all over the country regarding cases of domestic violence," says Anand. "We stood with them as their first support, because when someone is vulnerable or depressed they just need someone to hear them out. We extended them that support and ensured they didn't take any wrong step and diverted the calls to specialised organisations," she adds.

Although Lakshyam's forte was empowerment, when someone called in depressed, it wasn't appropriate to simply hang up, saying that they didn't deal with that issue, says Anand. "So we would listen via our in-house counsellor and further diverted the calls to other NGOs, the police, or the National Commission for Women on the basis of the requirements."

Q&A

What are the areas in which Lakshyam works and where are the beneficiaries located?

Lakshyam works in the areas of child development and women's empowerment. We started in Delhi almost a decade ago, but now we have spread our wings to 17 states through our partners and various programmes. Our focus area remains children and women, but with the kind of intervention we do, the overall community also gets benefited.

How do you keep the NGO financially viable?

For an NGO, the initial three years are about creating a mark by working hard so that people trust you as a genuine NGO before they give you any money. So I began doing fundraising events to raise funds. Even today, it continues to be one of the most important sources of funds followed by individuals who believe in us and become permanent donors. But the Covid-19 lockdown has changed the scene altogether. Most corporations are closing projects, individuals want to save money and we can't do events. So, we are launching social enterprises to sustain ourselves.

Over the years, a number of celebrities have put their weight behind the philanthropic causes pursued by Lakshyam. "We have been blessed as a lot of celebrities have supported and appreciated our work. I knew none of them personally nor had any contact with those who could help me reach them. But it has added a lot of value to us, because if someone sees that Salman Khan and Boman Irani are associated with us the trust factor comes in," adds Anand.



Tania Malhotra Sondhi (left) and Mishi Mehta Sood (right) are the brains behind the matrimonial agency MatchMe.

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— Tania Malhotra Sondhi, MatchMe

The gender bias on the show has received criticism

Sondhi, who has been running the outfit for five years says, "The people who come to us are taking the decision for themselves. They are under no pressure to get married and would only do so if they find the right person. The emphasis is not on physical attributes. Education is what most people look at first."

What has also riled a lot many people about the show is the way it treats the men and women differently. If a woman does not like a man considered "eligible" by Sima Auntie, she is labelled "stubborn" but a man doing that gets away with a more indulgent "unsure" tag. Sondhi does concede that, even in a class which does not deny women opportunities and education, there is certainly a bias. "The difference does exist in the corporate sector or the film world when we talk of pay parity between the sexes. Similarly, when a woman, who has a child from a previous marriage, wants to resettle she will find it tough as compared to a man. Though, given our clientele, this gap reduces. We have a lot of clients in their 40s who are liberal

and are ready to accept a woman with a child," she says. Gohain makes another pertinent point about the show which highlights how it differentiates between the men and the women. "When we see two men looking for brides on Indian Matchmaking, we do hear what they want but the women that they meet are not shown as having any preference or don't voice

content which seems to be pandering to stereotypes that exist in western minds about India. "Women being forced into marriage, not having a say in choice of partners or for that matter not meeting him before marriage pander to the impression of Indian exoticia. It is no longer true," she says. Of course, when dealing with a certain class of people — rich, business class, HNIs — there is one more thing which, though not stated, is an underlying sub text. "The family inheritance goes to the man while the sister is married off and is no longer a part of the family. The boy, who is a jeweller, is the heir while the sister watches from the sidelines," says Gohain. She observes that the matchmaker, Sima Taparia comes from a certain background which accounts for her attitude. "Sima admits that she was married off at a young age. It's also a generational thing and people of a certain age have the perception that women have to compromise. It isn't the perspective of the show but of Sima. The good thing is that the women on the show don't buy it." And neither are we.