

Case Study

Interview unique number: 08
Interview date: 11/10/2019
District: Hazaribagh
State: Jharkhand

Name: **Leela Kumari**

Age: **30**

Gender: **Female**

Education: **BA Graduate**

Marital Status: **Unmarried**

Highest education: **BA Graduate and Degree in Elementary education**

Current self-employment/ employment status: **Teachers training (underway); self employed**

Type of impairment: **Locomotor (Orthopaedic)**

Any other members with disabilities in family: **Brother**

Leela Kumari, a 30-year-old woman, just like many other women with disabilities, have been surviving the complex intersectionality of disability and gender for over 27 years in a rural setting of Hazaribagh, Jharkhand in India. Living through the polarizing as well as challenging encounters involved in the process of navigating among the social, economic and political dimensions of race, gender, and class; Leela remain perseverant.

At the age of three, she acquired polio i.e. locomotor disability because of which, she was unable to move and could only sit at one place. From then, her mother took the entire responsibility of washing, dressing and feeding her. With time, she learnt to move on her knees and later to walk with the help of a stick.

Pursuing and accessing education was challenging; beginning from the thought of approaching school and then back to home, has been a terrifying experience for her. Initially, Leela's mother took her to school for about two months and then she used to come home with someone known in the village.

"I used to walk on my knees till the entrance of my school. I used to request those I knew to drop me home. Sometimes, I used to wait for an hour to find an acquaintance. When I was in second grade, I requested someone from my village to drop me home. He said, "You trouble your family a lot! Why don't you die?" I was deeply hurt and left going to the school!"

She started studying in an adult education night school where she was tormented by demeaning comments from the teachers and students. Yet again, she dropped out of the school because of the negative behaviour and also due to access to school, as it was 30-40 km away from her home and she had to crawl on all four limbs to reach.

Eventually, she received a tricycle at the age of 11 and got admission in a public school in fifth standard. Her education journey resumed but with other difficult encounters. Her tricycle got damaged and she met with an accident due to which she couldn't attend the school for five months.

Not only Leela, but also her mother had to deal with the inaccessible education system, social thoughtlessness and discouraging societal attitude during her initial growth years. A tricycle gave her hope; however, the accident made her vulnerable because then she and her mother had to experience the inaccessible health facilities for her recovery from injuries. During her visits to the health institutions, there were times when she was mistreated and forced to stand in the queue even after explaining her condition, which made her leave in disappointment and distress. Another issue was lack of female doctors and male doctors attending female health issues, which made her extremely uncomfortable.

"I had breast pain and, in the hospital, I was checked by a male doctor as there was no female nurse /attendant. He touched my breasts and physically abused me. I could make it out but there was no option!!"

Leela's mother showed consistent support in accomplishing her college education and providentially, a decent cooperation was received from the college as well. Leela's mother took her for surgery and got her callipers. She was supported by classmates and teachers in the college and she felt encouraged to join computer course to add to her vocational skills. However, she dropped out of the computer course because the training centre was on the fourth floor and her request to shift the class at the ground floor was rejected.

"I wanted to pursue computer course to take it as vocational training. However, I was extremely pained and felt discriminated due to trainer's statement- 'I cannot bring the classes down for just one student'. All my dreams came to a standstill, and first time I realised that there should be stringent policies and inclusive vocational training set ups."

Albeit the fact that she had to go through several disappointments, she remained perseverant! When she was in 12th standard, she started to run a provisional store. To her advantage, she was registered for the disability pension scheme, which is an initiative by the government to assure a respectful life by providing financial assistance to persons with disabilities. She saved her disability pension and with 14,000 rupees and funding from her mother, she started the provisional store business. It was only her mother who stood by her in challenging times.

Leela stated, "A DPO member applied for her job for an Anganwadi worker. However, I was refused the job due to my disability and I was unmarried. I spoke to the higher officer, but she kept finding excuses for not to recruit me. I have escalated it further and the matter is still pending. I am shocked that how could being unmarried is a curse and those who are married gets a job as if being married is a blessing!!"

From her business, she earns approx. Rupees 2000/- per day which has helped in economic rehabilitation and empowered her as she is currently supporting her family, but also her brother who is disabled. This induced confidence in her and also, she is now efficient volunteer at 'Pradhan Mantri Aavas Yojana' in the Panchayat, where she does the verification of documents of those who have applied for the scheme. People in her village, who ignored and rejected her 'existence', now approach her with respect to get their applications processed.

Leela happily narrates "I feel proud when I see the same man who told me to 'die' in my school days', approaching me with respect and almost pleading to move his documents for the scheme. The change is not just in me, 'I see the change in their attitude' and feel good."

Apart from running her small business and working at the Panchayat, Leela works as an active Secretary at a local DPO. She proudly elaborates on how actively she takes decisions for the DPO and her male colleagues appreciate her participation and pay attention to her viewpoints. She facilitates provision of tricycles to women with disabilities, create livelihood options and guide them for loan, spread awareness on their rights, and assist in forming a Gender Committee in the DPO.

As per Leela, "if more women join the DPO, it will be a motivating factor for other women, they will feel empowered like me and will no more be an invisible minority..."

Currently, Leela is access auditing public spaces such as schools and anganwadis. Her DPO's co-members are happy to have her as a strong and powerful woman leader who advocates for rights of other women with disabilities (WwDs) and support a right based inclusive society where there should not be any attitudinal or physical barriers. However, she said she needs to be trained especially on the policies and schemes related to police procedures for WwDs such as how can one file a complaint, what happens if the women is with speech and hearing impairment, or what action one can take if police is not responding, etc. She also want more information on how can police address issues of WwDs with dignity and without harassment.

Leela was an active participant in the Disability Inclusive SDG Score Card held in her state. She took part in addressing the interface meeting and also co-facilitating the women with disabilities group discussion.

With joy and utter satisfaction, she recounts “I was nervous while holding the mike, but when I looked around I got my confidence back and could recall all my opening speech lines. I have spoken in the mike for the first time in my life in this score card process, but now I am confident that I can address better community meetings and actively advocacy for other women with disabilities.”

Leela’s experiences have evolved her thinking as she has experienced the issues of women with disabilities (WwDs). She shared few **recommendations**, which are as follows:

- Skills should be given priority than the marital status. Being married should not be mandatory for qualifying for a particular job
- Advocacy by WwDs for other WwDs
- Training and sensitization of teachers towards the rights of girls and women with diverse disabilities
- Accessible vocational training centres and women friendly skill training, so that WwDs are economically independent
- In rural areas, monitoring of non-disabled and persons with disabilities accessing gram panchayat services, as people with disabilities are not getting the adequate services or largely remains recipients of ‘third class’ services, she narrates, as compared to non-disabled persons who get access to information faster and obtain services without running post to pillar.
- Awareness on police policies and procedures w.r.t. WwDs in the village/block level
- Connecting and networking with other WwDs to get knowledge, information and social security and support
- Formation of “Gender Committee” and not ‘woman committee’ to address rights-based advocacy and prevention of abuse & violence against WwDs. She was told about such committees by other members of her DPO who had participated in Gender Assessment training conducted by Samarthyam under EU project. She has started advocating for girls and women with disabilities as she has experienced marginalisation and discrimination for many years due to being a woman and then acquiring disability.
- Monitoring of public places by access audits and implementation of recommendations. All judiciary buildings- courts, police stations, etc. should be made accessible on priority
- Monitoring of schools to ensure children with disabilities are admitted, are learning effectively, record of dropped out girls with disabilities and reasons for same
- Data collection of WwDs who have received certificates, pension and appropriate assistive devices and reasons of delays or denials?