

Case Study

Interview unique number: 02
Interview date: 29/11/2019
District: Bikaner
State: Rajasthan

Name: **Rekha Meghwal**
Age: **29**
Gender: **Female**
Education: **M.A. Hindi, Sociology**
Marital Status: **Unmarried**
Highest education: **Master of Arts**
Current self-employment/ employment status: **NGO Employee**
Type of impairment: **Locomotor**
Any other members with disabilities in family: **NA**

Rekha, a 29-year-old woman developed polio at the age of three due to negligence of doctors and acquired life long disability. She went to school when she was five years old.

Adversities couldn't bring down her enthusiasm to pursue education. She described her school days as,

Rekha stated, "My parents thought that it would be easier for me if I went to school with my sister. The school was half kilometre away from my house and I used to walk to school and took 15-20 minutes to reach."

"I never liked taking off from school. Only during heavy rains, I would not go sometime. I could not play with others because I thought I would not be able to, so, I would sit at the back and see others play. I never got any opportunity to participate in the school activities as teachers would never let me participate. Once our school planned a picnic trip, I persuaded a lot to take me. First reaction was a 'no' from class teacher, but after lot of pressure, the teacher spoke to the principal and I could go for the picnic. Parents supported me too. This was my first victory."

However, she hated with everyday need to use toilet in the school which was squatting type and she could not sit on the floor. She highlighted the desperate need of accessible toilets in the school for girls with disabilities, which felt like a dream during those days. She narrated her experience:

"During periods, I faced lot of inconvenience going to the toilet as it was always very dirty. I used to wear callipers and had issues in using squatting toilet pan and I used to bend down keeping one leg straight. I used to take someone with me. While urinating, my clothes used to get dirty. During periods, I would somehow manage to stand and change cloth pads taking some support from the walls of the toilet. I used to throw the used cloth pads in the dustbin. There was no roof on the toilet and it was a very small compartment. We all suffered weather adversities during summer and rain. But there was no option!"

In Rekha's case, her sister used to get annoyed looking after her during the school and carrying Rekha's bag along with her own. She didn't like to sit on the same desk with Rekha in the classroom as well. In order to maintain the self-respect and live with dignity, persons with disabilities seldom choose not to speak about their needs to others and accept whatever is being provided. Her sister's attitude made it awkward for her to ask for any help even from outsiders, and rather she used to suffer silently. There were times when she had to bear physical abuse from her sister.

Rekha states, "My sister was always annoyed with me. I never took her to the toilet with me, she was indifferent to my challenges. When we were in class VI, books became heavier. My father decided to give us two bags. My sister used to get angry at times and when we would return from school and she used to throw my bag outside the house in anger and go inside. I felt humiliated and bullied by my younger sister."

"She used to fight a lot with me and many a times she hit me. I never said anything at home. She never hit me at home because she was scared of father. Sometimes when my father got to know about her hitting me, he used to scold her. Hence she reacted violently and wanted to give up studies. My parents were also hurt due to her attitude and decided to make me continue studies and aspired for my higher education. Currently I am a double MA and have made my parents proud."

Lack of awareness towards different kinds of mobility aids and barrier-filled infrastructure to accommodate use of the aids is of prime concern. In the school, Rekha's classmates used to tease her whenever they saw her wearing callipers. They used to always address her as 'langdi'. Rekha tried to ignore all their remarks but the teasing never stopped.

Rekha states, "we used to sit on a floor rug and we didn't have any table/chair in our school. I sat on the 'dari' till class VIII. From class IX and onwards, I got a table and a chair. For support I used to keep one leg on another chair."

Rekha narrates the difficulty she experienced incarrying her school bag while walking with the callipers,

"In higher classes, the bag became heavier. It was difficult for me to carry heavy bag and walk with the callipers. My sister used to get angry whenever I asked her to help me with the bag. Route to the school was across a busy road, and I was always scared. I spoke to school Principal and I suggested to keep one set of books in the school and another at home. My father earned Rs. 60 per day and it was quite difficult for him to manage two sets of books for me. But he promised to bring it in 15-20 days and he kept his promise. This solution worked and I was saved from humiliation of carrying heavy bag daily to school."

Since past one year, Rekha has been working in a child line in NGO Urmul Trust in Bikaner, where she handle cases of child abuse (age 0-18 years). Her work includes visiting schools, Anganwadi and health centres to raise awareness about the toll-free helpline number. She highlights that her work involves lot of travel and field visits for which she need to arrange her own transportation. She feels independent as she travels one her own.

"Although, NGO have provision of travel allowance but the vehicles are not accessible. Other than that, I am always encouraged to work and I never felt discriminated in the NGO."

Through training and discussions in DPO where she is a member, she has gained confidence to speak up for her rights. Rekha shared one of the incident which further motivated her to upheld rights of women.

"I was standing at a bus stand and a woman was waiting there with a baby. I saw two men smoking with smoke blowing towards the baby. I asked those men to move from there they looked at me and I eyed them with coolness; they got up and moved away. Earlier we would discuss about our rights only among ourselves, now we exert it. I reach out to more people with disabilities in public spaces, while travelling in buses and trains, anywhere because I have realised that women need to be supported and together we can bring the change we are waiting for."

She also points out the significance of an educated family and stated, "my mother was illiterate and I taught her how to read and write. Had she been educated and literate, she would have had more awareness to guide us and we could have been better human beings."

Although, Rekha enjoyed work environment, however she was concerned about attitude of non-disabled women towards women with disabilities.

"Many women would ridicule me stating why I am fussy during periods, while they do not have any problem. I face heavy bleeding, nausea and I am unable to travel for field work. I am taunted that they take heavy work during menstruation also, while I excuse for not working and need holiday! They never realised that every women has individual menstruation management needs and we need empathy and flexibility in working days."

Rekha got gender training in the Gender Assessment organised by Samarthyam DPO during SDG project of Sightsavers and EU. After her gender training, she has become tech savvy. Now, she is able to recharge her mobile phone, use google pay easily, transact money from ATM, and makes whats app group to remin

in touch with persons with disabilities; among others. She said, "I recharge my TV as well now and not afraid to use technology anymore."

These training also taught her about violence (both physical and mental) faced by women at home and in community. She recalls her neighbour facing domestic violence, and had no where to go. The family continued abusing her and she was submissive due to lack of social security.

Rekha recommended following based on learning from training and experiences:

1. Schools should provide accessible transportation for children with disabilities
2. Sitting arrangement should be as per the needs of children with disability. There should be chairs and tables to sit comfortably for long hours for children using mobility aids
3. Provision of accessible toilets in school with European toilet seat, hence there should not be squatting on floor
4. Reasonable accommodation in jobs and field work during menstruation for women with disabilities
5. Women with disabilities should have assistive devices as per their disability specific needs made available to them on priority
6. Social security and shelters/ homes and care institutions for women with disabilities should be provided by the government