

# A walk through the other side of India

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Through the eyes of a young woman, a million queries and unanswered questions arise when she goes out into a different world and explores something new and inspiring. The summer holidays of 2022 made me want to do something interesting, productive, and useful which led me to the thinking of joining an internship with an NGO to learn some valuable skills and explore new paths that I'm yet to unfold and discover. After a lot of discussion with my parents and friends, I decided to join Shanti Ashram, whose sole motive is to serve the community and attain happiness and peace. My main aim was to cultivate new interests and gain knowledge before I get back to my regular school schedule in June.

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I began my journey in this beautiful place led by Dr.Kezevino Aram on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2022. The bustling yet calm scenery of the ashram got me excited for my first day of work. This fresh, lively and aesthetically pleasing place drove me to work every single day. I was working under the sustainable development program along with Dr.S.R.Subramanian and Ms. Monica. The project that I was working on was 'Strengthening Leadership through Women's Empowerment and Entrepreneurship'<sup>1</sup>.

Women have always taken up a very important part of the society yet several of their dreams have also been crushed by multiple people. In today's fast-moving world, it is a necessity to be independent to fight for your own and win your respect. In the rural areas especially, women are curtailed of several rights and freedom, but it was very astonishing to see how the lives of many women living in the rural areas have changed immensely by just attempting to start and run their own business. These women entrepreneurs have not only benefitted their families by earning an income but have also earned their respect and space for themselves in the society. This gives them the confidence and assurance of achieving something in life.

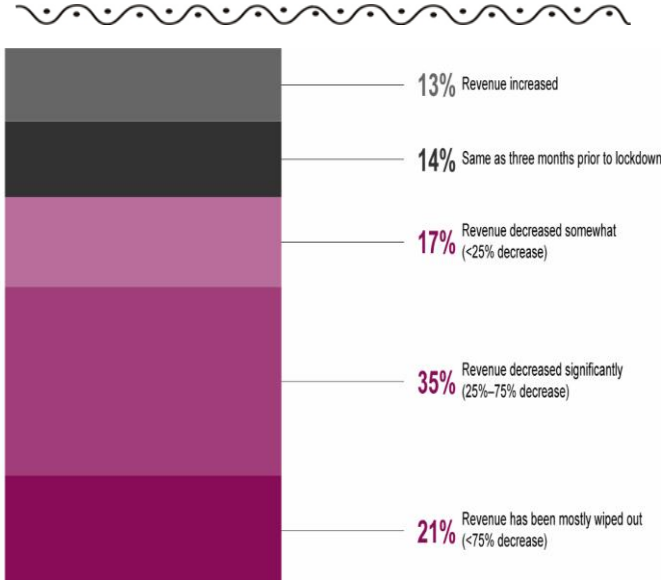


## A week in the service villages of Shanti Ashram:

On the afternoon of 11<sup>th</sup> May 2022, I was accompanied by Dr.S.R.Subramanian and Monica to visit the village of Chavadipudur where 5 women entrepreneurs live and run their businesses. The minute I got down from the vehicle their warmth and welcoming nature overwhelmed and surprised me. Me being an absolute stranger to them did not limit them from welcoming me into their homes and answering all the doubts and questions that I had. Plenty of women were hardly educated enough to understand the pros and cons of running a business yet their sole motive was not only for

the profit maximization for their family but also for the welfare of the society. These inspiring entrepreneurs continued to serve their community even during the widespread pandemic. They helped the people living in their area as much as possible to ensure that nobody suffers to a great length. Regardless of their hardships during the pandemic, their resilience to wake up every day and continue their day-to-day activities and help the other people in need was extremely impressive.

### A RECENT STUDY ON THE LIVES OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS DURING THE WIDESPREAD PANDEMIC:



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The small tiffin stall or the diary shop that they had helped their community extensively in fulfilling their daily hunger. For plenty of women entrepreneurs, their families and husbands were also equally supportive of their business and helped them as and when required.

From the perspective of each entrepreneur’s family, the lives and businesses of several women entrepreneurs were adversely impacted by the multiple COVID-19 induced lockdowns. These

lockdowns were accompanied by restrictions on the operating of businesses imposed by the government during the years 2020 and 2021. Several women were struggling to keep their businesses going. These entrepreneurs had to work for extended hours but with no extra income.

Further, the reduction in working hours the job losses among their customers and the reduction in income have led to Even though the optimistic nature and motivation that they had towards their businesses inspired me, to hear about their plight during the pandemic was extremely sad.

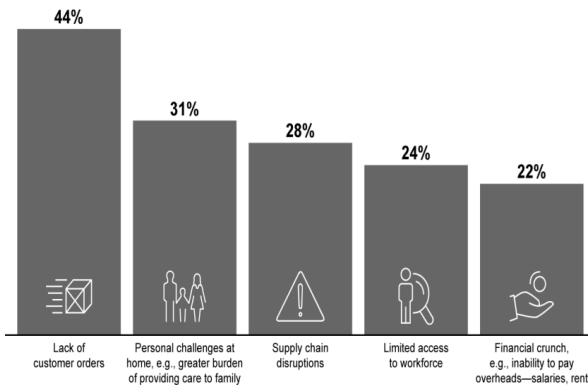
Over 70% of women entrepreneurs surveyed faced a decline in the business revenue due to COVID-driven lockdown and restrictions reduced spending and an ensuing decrease in income for a lot of these entrepreneurs.

### INTERPRETATION:

- a) **Most of the entrepreneurs’ businesses have not returned to pre-Covid-19 levels.** After an abrupt drop in March and April due to the lockdown, growth in businesses is at about one-third of pre-Covid-19 levels. Only selected entrepreneurs have been able to return to pre-Covid-19 levels.
- b) **Working remotely appears to be effective but is offset by an increase in domestic responsibilities.** Operating from home, while enabling greater flexibility in ordinary circumstances, has had a mixed impact on women entrepreneurs during the crisis. Fifty-seven percent of the women are having the same or higher productivity while working from home. However, the 43% that experienced a drop in productivity, attribute it largely to increased domestic responsibilities and distractions.



**1) Muted customer demand and added domestic responsibilities have been the top challenges faced by women entrepreneurs:**



**INTERPRETATION:**

- a) **Muted demand: Almost 45% of the women cited lack of customer orders as the biggest challenge.** With the lockdowns creating new demand patterns and rendering others obsolete, some business models were at a greater risk.
- b) **Increased domestic responsibilities: About 30% of women cited personal challenges, including significantly greater at-home care responsibilities, as a major obstacle in running their business.** Factors such as home confinement of the entire family, closure of schools, and disruptions in crucial assistance, including house help and childcare, have led to a disproportionate share of domestic responsibilities falling on women.
- c) **Financing crunch: Ninety percent of women said lack of financial resources has been a major challenge.** Nearly 80% of those interviewed have not applied for financing support, potentially due to growth constraints during the pandemic. Businesses experienced an immediate cash flow crunch due to lower sales and delayed payments.

**The idly audit:**

We have all heard about the 85-year-old grandma who sells idli's at Rupees 1 to the poor and needy in Coimbatore. Little did we know that several other women entrepreneurs like her serve food in different parts of the town to their community at a selfless service cum low margin business model and they also ensure that there is food security in their area.

One such woman that I encountered during my meeting was a 62-year-old woman entrepreneur from Sundakkamuthur the periphery of Coimbatore, Ms. Lakshmi who runs her own idly shop at her residence. She has been running her business for almost 28 years at a no-profit no-loss stage.

She makes around 500-600 fresh and fluffy idli's every day and almost all of them get sold without any wastage. The COVID 19 pandemic did not stop her from continuing her business. She was still supplying to all of her community members every day without any changes in the pricing system. Even though the rate of the raw materials required in making the idly, sambar, and chutney increased during the pandemic she never attempted or even thought of increasing the final product that she sold.

An interesting and quite an astonishing fact is that every idly that she sells is for nothing more than Rupees 2. She was initially selling idli's at 50 paise per idly but over the years she had to increase the cost to Rupees 2, due to the hike in the cost of raw materials such as rice, urad dal, coconut, and vegetables. This got me extremely surprised and thinking of how a person can live and sustain on a no-profit, no-loss stage for almost 3 long decades. The spirit and commitment that this lady has, continues to amaze me every day.

## Learning from the crisis: adapting for uncertainty

Despite the financial and economic distress faced by these women entrepreneurs, they did not lose hope or their desire to fulfill their goals of a better life for themselves and their communities. I was inspired to see how everyone was engaged in serving their communities in the best possible way that they could, despite their uncertain futures. Each and every entrepreneur was looking for ways to grow their enterprise and diversify their existing business to earn extra income for their families. In an increasingly individualistic world, meeting women who were thinking beyond their own needs to contribute to the well-being of the community was truly impressive. It was enthralling to see such women develop a skill and create a space for themselves in the society.

**My main learnings from meeting these women entrepreneurs and working at Shanti Ashram was that perseverance, resilience, focus, and hard work takes you a step closer to achieving your goals.**

The work that Shanti Ashram has been doing for several years is phenomenal and extremely impressive. So, I would say that this whole internship has been extremely interesting and every day I learnt new things and imbibed different values and cultures.

**It gave me a totally new perspective on different thoughts and also gave me the opportunity to understand another side of India better.**

*THANK YOU*

*Anannya Sudarshan*



Shanti Ashram

Gandhian center for development, learning and collaboration



Shanti Ashram's  
Mahatma Gandhi Institute  
for Peace, Leadership and Development



INTERNATIONAL  
CENTER FOR CHILD  
AND PUBLIC HEALTH  
30th year initiative of Shanti Ashram

<sup>1</sup> The Sustainable Development Programme at Shanti Ashram was launched in 1986 inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Sarvodaya. 86 rural women entrepreneurs are part of the programme's consortium today and spread across 24 villages.

During the COVID 19 Pandemic the 4 Public Distribution Shops led by Shanti Ashram's rural women entrepreneurs played a critical role in ensuring food security for 4100 families under the poverty line. They also supported in bringing Governments Direct Cash Transfers (DCT) of Rs.120 Laksh to the families under their care during the pandemic to families covered them.

Young professionals from around the world come to Shanti Ashram to learn and contribute back to society. Through her people, community development interventions, spirit of GANDHI and faith traditions **Shanti Ashram** provides internship opportunities to both national and international students **The internships are provided with the following objectives:**

- Developing capacities of student interns
- Exposing the interns to the Ashram's activities
- To help carry out in-depth studies in select areas
- To facilitate volunteering & talent sharing in the Ashram's different programmes and beyond

Students ranging from high school students to graduates and research scholars take up internship as part of their academic programme to get exposure to community development. The internship helps the students to understand the different dimensions of development and the potential that the students and young professionals have in positively impacting themselves and the world around them through volunteering and concrete action.