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DURGA DARES

DURGA INDIA'S OFFICIAL MONTHLY NEWSLETTER



ABOUT DURGA

(An Initiative by I'm Every Woman Trust)

At Durga, we strive to identify problematic attitudes, stereotypes, and societal norms and address them from the grassroots level to ensure a collaborative effort within our society to create safe spaces for women.

Most women in India are consistently living in fear of potential or repeated harassment. This is reflected in the way a woman dresses, sits, talks, commutes, or converses. Sadly, all these seemingly normal social interactions are predominantly influenced by negative experiences.

The Durga family aims to inspire change in all arenas of a woman's life; from their home to their place of work, by placing responsibility not on women, but in the hands of the communities that surround them.

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

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In this world that's infested with patriarchy and toxic masculinity, where do we find spaces where we can be ourselves? I keep looking for a space where I can just be me, think for myself and be random. I yearn for spaces that don't dictate what I should wear, what I should say, if I need to smile as I speak and of course, if I need to keep my voice low!

Durga, for me became a space that I want to share with anyone who feels like I do. It's for anyone who wants to figure themselves out. For anyone who loves to live. Anyone who wants choice. Who want their tribe. Who Dare!

This is the beginning for us to share and learn about people and stories of how we Dare. How we provide a space for women, girls and all people to Dare to act, Dare to defy and Dare to question patriarchy!

Priya Varadarajan

**CHIEF IMAGINATION OFFICER/
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AMBATTUR MARKET, CHENNAI



DURGA'S LENS: WOMEN AT WORK

PHOTOS BY PAVITRA D, A STUDENT OF CHRIST UNIVERSITY AND AN INTERN AT DURGA INDIA. THESE PICTURES OF WOMEN STREET VENDORS WERE TAKEN TO CAPTURE EXPERIENCES OF THEIR WORK DAY AND THE JOY THEY FOUND IN LITTLE THINGS. ALL PICTURES HAVE BEEN TAKEN WITH PRIOR CONSENT.





LOKESHWARI'S STORY

"If I had a girl child, I would have done the same thing. This is my job."

In this month's newsletter, we chronicle Lokeshwari's story. A pourakarmika by profession, Lokeshwari approached our facilitators after her engagement with Durga and told them a story. Although we had heard this story before, it had a different ending; an ending where a woman who had little agency in terms of deciding her occupation and conditions of work, was able to take action and transform the future of another woman. Lokeshwari is a Durga. If we follow her example, we can be one too.



Lokeshwari, a regular at Durga's sessions was in for a surprise. Her world came to a grinding halt as she witnessed a young woman almost become a victim of an acid attack. What happened next is a story of courage; one only a Durga could narrate.

Stench, disease and death- who would put their lives on the line for this?

Lokeshwari did. Timid, shy Lokeshwari. Lokeshwari, who had been in the profession over a decade and whose days had never been longer or more routine. I had met her as a part of Durga's DARE programme, where we were regularly engaging with pourakarmikas to not only make their workspaces safer but also equip them to step in and play an active role in deterring harassment, due to their presence in public commons. **The philosophy is that once you place power in the hands of the people, citizen safety becomes a collective responsibility.**

However, I was pleased with Lokeshwari's progress in our sessions. She had become more open, more aware. On a day just as ordinary as the other, she left for work. However, the sessions with Durga rung in her head as she started work. To take away the mundaneness of her work, she plugged her earphones in, listening to a song or two, her watchful eyes scanning the area to see if anything was amiss.



Suddenly, loud cheering and laughter cut through the sound of her broom's swishing. At the intersection of the road, Lokeshwari noticed a group of students who were celebrating a birthday, however, they seemed to be oblivious to the noise they were creating. Lokeshwari picked her broom and got to work, however, the noise kept her distracted. At one point, there was a cake cutting, which resulted in hoots of laughter and loud singing. Seeing a shadow against her own startled Lokeshwari, however, it turned out to be a girl who was motioning towards a slice of cake which she held in her hand. Lokeshwari smiled, she wasn't used to such gestures from people. She accepted the cake graciously.

Soon, the group dispersed and silence returned to the surroundings. 3-4 people hung around in pairs, but soon, it was just the girl who had offered her cake, standing with a boy, engaging in silly, day to day conversation. In a second, however, the tone shifted. Lokeshwari removed her earphones, and listened intently.

The boy was confessing his feelings for the girl, but his manner of talking seemed to signal that he was giving the girl an ultimatum; say no and watch the consequences. The girl was in disbelief, trying to reason with him, but to no avail. However, the boy was insistent. He didn't like this upright refusal, neither did he like his grand gesture of love being unreciprocated.

His face darkened. Lokeshwari watched in shock as he pulled out a glass vial from his pocket. Although it looked like water, Lokeshwari knew from her sessions at Durga that it was anything but. She quickened her pace and immediately stepped in. Her immediate concern was to garner attention, so she started to admonish the boy loudly, which led several people in the neighbourhood to come out of their houses and gather at the scene. However, the boy still held the glass vial in his hand. Between him and the girl, there was just one woman- Lokeshwari. Who is Durga, without her weapons? Who was Lokeshwari, without the tools she had been using for over 19 years? With a quick motion of her hand, she struck the vial. The bottle fell to the ground, and acid spilled over the concrete sidewalk. A sigh of relief erupted from Lokeshwari and the girl's mouth.

Lokeshwari offered Durga a brief testimony of how she felt in the moment. She simply said "If I had a girl child, I would have done the same thing. This is my duty; my responsibility." Why did we tell you Lokeshwari's story? It is because in our stories about empowered women, we speak of a special category of women- who have class, caste and ethnic privilege. Lokeshwari isn't someone who holds power in either of those categories. However, her quick reactions, proactive intervention and dissolving a severely tense situation are telling that being a Durga is a mindset shift, which doesn't have to be too far removed from your surroundings. That's the power of Lokeshwari. She is a story of change, self transformation and finding one's identity. She is a Durga.

JOHNSON MARKET, BENGALURU



SHANTHINAGAR, BENGALURU



DURGA'S LENS: WOMEN AT WORK

PHOTOS BY TOMCY, PROGRAMME COORDINATOR AT DURGA INDIA. TOMCY RECALLED TAKING THESE PICTURES TO SEE WHAT FEMINISM MEANT TO HER; WAS IT JUST WOMEN IN WHITE COLLAR JOBS OR WAS IT DAILY NEGOTIATIONS AND TUSSELS TO CLAIM PUBLIC SPACES?

UDUPI, KARNATAKA



Did you know?

Laxmi Narayan Tripathy, a trans woman from Thane, starred in an award-winning documentary called 'Between The Lines: India's Third Gender' in the year 2005. Lakshmi also featured in 'Queens! Destiny Of Dance', a Bollywood movie that has received critical acclaim.

Gender and Sexual Orientation: Word Search

B	G	E	H	O	P	L	A	N	C
P	R	E	C	G	H	I	N	A	O
R	F	A	N	K	E	N	W	B	N
I	U	L	N	D	T	T	B	G	S
D	N	E	T	D	E	E	E	A	E
E	N	D	E	S	R	R	N	Y	N
O	E	B	N	Y	O	S	B	R	T
C	L	I	T	J	L	E	G	H	T
U	M	A	L	E	B	X	B	F	A
S	B	S	E	Y	U	A	L	E	S

Can you find the following words?

GENDER
HETERO
BIAS
MALE

INTERSEX
CONSENT
PRIDE
GAY



Scan this to know more!



NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Article by Thejaswini Suresh (Programme Coordinator at Durga India)

Working in Durga India, an organisation dedicated to women's upliftment has been a transformative journey filled with profound experiences, challenges, and rewards. As I work closely with both men and women, striving to empower women in various aspects of their lives, I have witnessed firsthand the immense potential for change and the importance of fostering gender equality. As a Programme Coordinator, one of my primary responsibilities is to create awareness about women's rights, gender biases, and societal norms that hinder women's progress. Through theatre based workshops, community dialogues, and interactive sessions, my team and I engage with both men and women, encouraging them to critically examine existing gender dynamics in their day to day.

By challenging long-standing beliefs and advocating for equal opportunities, we strive to shift mindsets and foster a more inclusive society. Working on the ground with the BBMP pourakamika women has helped me gain insight into the issues that women face in their private lives, and why they rarely speak up about it in public; it is because they don't have adequate forums where they can be heard without judgement. In the initial sessions, the pourakarmikas were reticent and closed off, across places and field sites we frequented. But as the sessions carried on, they mustered the courage to speak up about their struggles and their experiences in the presence of other women who would give them an encouraging nod or just the gift of listening, as they were seated in the circle.

There was an incident in which one of the women shared an incident that disturbed me to my core; a drunken father had sexually abused his own daughter and attempted to rape her. This made me think about how despite advancements in technology and science, we were regressing with regard to humanity; with no empathy or respect for each other. However, I didn't want this story to shape my outlook on the world. Instead, I was prompted to look deeper into our work with men, in particular, BMTC working men who are covered by our 'Unlikely Allies' programme. The philosophy we share at Durga is echoed through this programme; that by working with men and transforming them into active bystanders, they are able to understand the value of their intervention and take women's safety as a matter close to their well being. Imagine the value of taking this to the men we engaged with! To make men in public spaces understand just how valuable their actions to safeguard public safety are. To let them know that their helping hand could potentially mean that a woman could go in for work, could know of an ally, could dream of a safe city.



This month, our team also got the opportunity to engage with several government school children in Kalaburagi. We held workshops with adolescent girls to educate them on gender equality and women's safety. My team members and I learned from the session that these young girls weren't aware of how nuanced sexual harassment and violence is; to them, rape is the only form of sexual violence that warrants punishment while other minor forms of harassment such as verbal assault were normalised in their day to day.

Whether it was realised or not, my observation was that this understanding of sexual harassment inhibited them to be their most creative selves because of the restricted information they had. With the aid of our workshops, however, we were able to see their curiosity towards learning more and their desire to educate their inner circles, including family members about the violence that was inflicted on young women and girls everyday.

In my own learnings throughout the month, I kept wondering about young men who were victims of deep rooted misogyny and pseudo-masculinity. How we can break the chain and raise men who are capable of asserting themselves without violence, is a question I grapple with, almost everyday. However, it is something the team at Durga is working relentlessly to achieve. In our quest to drive positive change and build a more inclusive and equitable world for all, Durga's multi pronged approach to tackle issues of women's safety, makes me feel proud of my work, and keeps me focused on the goal: ensuring a sexual harassment free world for all.

Enjoyed this newsletter? Stay tuned for next month! We're accepting submissions too!

Mail your contributions to the following email id: winnie@durgaindia.org

Follow us on Instagram: [@durgaindiaofficial](https://www.instagram.com/durgaindiaofficial) and on Twitter: [@durgaindia1](https://twitter.com/durgaindia1)