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## **LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM WOMEN WHO ROSE LIKE PHOENIX FROM THE ASHES**

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**Abstract:** In the year 2017 I launched a website Unbridled Women ([www.unbridledwomen.com](http://www.unbridledwomen.com)) with a vision to share stories of inspirational women around me. During my public health related field trips in the year 2017-2018 I had met women of unconventional wisdom and courage. Lessons learnt compelled me to disclose them the wider audience, especially young and budding leaders. As I look back, I feel grateful towards those women who shared their life stories with me, who were generous with their time and patient in helping me understand the work they do. This manuscript talks about four such women who have impacted my life in a profound manner and continue to. I believe that we can learn a lot about leadership from these women and that can help us to take cognizance of our collective responsibility of service towards the community.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Leadership, Education, Societal Service.

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**Introduction:** Youth seems to be deluded towards their responsibility to society in contemporary times. However, they alone cannot be blamed; the way they are nurtured has a significant role to play and guides their thought process and conduct towards the society. This determines the role they choose to play in the society as they grow up. A lack of mindfulness to leverage one's education to create value in society seems conspicuous. A leadership crisis seems to exist and proliferate. Excessive desire for comfort can hamper personal growth and impede character building. Youth is an age of experimentation, a phase of life in which the young person gathers mental sinew by facing challenges both internal and external and an opportunity to become a conscious human being. A young responsible person often goes on to become a responsible adult, an empathetic and a compassionate leader.

While academic education and learning is indispensable, it is equally important to instruct students about the real value of education and its inter-relationship with development in a society. What seems like a rare commodity in the world – education guided socioeconomic service, needs to become common. The impact of real life accounts on this front cannot be emphasized enough. Life stories can be a vital tool to mobilize youth towards social responsibility.

In this work I would like to highlight the lessons from my experiences after meeting four phenomenal women. These women continue to serve the society oblivious of any recognition and in my opinion form the best examples of leadership and selfless service. Their relentless service has led me to question self on, "What am I doing with my education?"

**Methodology:** I met all four women on different occasions. I met two of them during my field trip to Comprehensive Rural Health Project (CRHP), Jamkhed, Maharashtra. I met the third one in a symposium on Rare Diseases and the fourth one through a friend. Most of my

interactions with them were conversation based, observation based where I got to know about their work; sometimes I also interviewed them. With their consent I have published all the articles relating to them on my website, links to which can be found in the References section. They have allowed me to use their real names. I present this work in the manner of 4 brief case studies.

**Case Studies:** In this section I present the stories of all four women in brief.

**Ratna:** Ratna is the manager of the organic farm at CRHP. Her journey of becoming the head of the organic farm had not been an easy one, nor had she anticipated that it would happen with such dramatic turn of events [1]. She was married young to a man who had hidden his HIV positive status from her. When Ratna got to know about it, she was supportive although shattered by the perfidy that had unearthed. Before long, her husband died leaving her with their infant. After the death of her husband she herself was to be diagnosed with HIV and eventually was ostracized not only from her in-laws house but her maternal home also did not accept her. Removed from both the support systems she became a daily wage earner, struggling to make the ends meet while also taking care of her infant. During the break time she used to go to her child to feed him, until one day he was no more. He had died due to HIV. Life had come to a standstill for Ratna and it was during that time that she met a village health worker who told her about CRHP and took her there. CRHP not only changed her life, but has, according to her, also transformed the way she looks at life now. Dr. Arole, the founder of CRHP had inducted her into organic farming. There used to be implicit disagreements among other farm workers regarding her presence but Dr. Arole demystified all myths regarding living with HIV positive people during an informal lunch meeting. After that, a sense of solidarity and respect ensued and Ratna's life became slightly easier. A respectable job had somehow empowered her and although the memories of her pain and loss were always there, she overcame them slowly but steadily. Today, she is the proud manager of the organic farm, mentors new people and also has a daughter whom she has adopted.

**Ramabai:** Ramabai was the second woman I had met at CRHP. She is a village health worker working at CRHP [2]. She had accompanied the Mobile Health Unit team of CRHP during one of my field trips. She was an elderly lady but her knowledge defied her age. She was highly adept in examining the health of people and knew on her fingertips the number of pregnant women, diabetic and hypertensive people in the village. She demonstrated to me the use of sphygmomanometer and also showed me the procedure to measure sugar level of diabetic people. I was amazed at how precise her knowledge was and how dexterous she was in handling the responsibility of being a village health worker in the chronic absence of doctors. CRHP was awarded at Times Social Award due to the efforts of Ramabai that had saved the life of a girl child. She had told me something which continues to reverberate in my mind even today, **"It is not education or literacy, it is my will and appropriate training that has led me to do this. The villagers have elected me and trust me, I feel honored to be able to help them in ways I can."**

**Archana Ravindra:** I met Archana Ravindra at a symposium of Rare Diseases in January 2017. She has Osteogenesis Imperfecta (Brittle bone disease). What led me to contact Archana for future conversations and interviews was a statement made by her at the symposium. She had said, **"I do not feel sad or disappointed about OI happening to me, I feel proud for OI has made me a strong person emotionally"**. I would be lying if I say that the statement had not shocked me, it had and later on filled my heart with much respect for her [3]. Archana was

diagnosed with OI quite early in her life and there were many challenges in her life right from the schooling days to college days. Despite this, Archana decided that Montessori schooling was to become her career. At the age of 26 she started her own Montessori school in 1998 and it was the first one in the place where she used to live. She ran it for 16 years and now offers herself as a Montessori consultant and at times represents the Indian Montessori Centre. Not only this, she runs a small business venture where she designs Montessori materials and markets them. Archana has a graduate degree in Home Science and post graduate in Public Relations and today she is contributing in the field of Montessori education guided by her intrinsic passion. Archana also told me about starting a registry for people with rare diseases. What was most incredible for me to know about Archana was the impact yoga has created in her life. She told me that yoga has transformed her body and led to significant increase in the bone density confirmed by medical reports [4]. Archana is the moniker of people who empower self and then empower others.

**Saranya Francis:** Saranya was sexually assaulted by two men at the age of 17 and the incident was to change everything in her life [5]. After the tough time following the incident, Saranya resolved to come back stronger and discuss her story with a vision to instill courage, empathy and a sense of mutual respect among youngsters, school and college children. Today she is a teacher, soft skills and life skills trainer, content writer and a poet. She is an activist involved in work pertaining to women empowerment, education for the girl child and transgender persons. She has trained several women Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to set up their own entrepreneurial ventures in association with government bodies. She was behind setting up of the Women's Welfare Wing at Edutel Technologies Pvt. Limited, a satellite-based education company where she works as an Academic Subject Matter Expert. She travels widely and spends time training students and staff of various institutions on dealing with sexual harassment and domestic violence. In her capacity as a motivational speaker, her interest lies particularly in getting young women to see beyond an incident of sexual harassment and rise above inhibiting themselves as 'victims'. Her maiden anthology of poetry *Being Purple* received some rave reviews from critics and connoisseurs alike and a second anthology *Ambedro* has been released recently.

**Lessons:** In this section I discuss the lessons that I learnt from Ratna, Ramabai, Archana and Saranya.

1. Ratna teaches me about inner strength and mental fortitude. She took the ownership of her life in her hands and is financially independent today. From her we can learn that a strong resolve and unshakeable determination can upend the worst challenges in life. Also, Ratna as an employed person in the enterprise of organic farming proves as stated in [6] that the development of micro-enterprises at grass-root level assists in amelioration of several socio-economic problems stemming from poverty and unemployment.
2. Ramabai teaches us that when she can do so much for the community, we as educated youth, men and women of the country can do so much more. We need people like Ramabai to support us in the bigger cause. We learn the meaning of selfless service to community from her life. Ramabai is regularly trained at CRHP. Through her example we learn that in addition to the will power and some extra efforts of women participants in rural areas, locally organized training programmes can empower them and make the political and administrative process of governance more progressive and inclusive [7].

3. Archana teaches us that despite functional limitations and physical deformities, anyone can achieve their dreams. We also learn that one's bodily challenges cannot impede in one's motivation to create value in society through meaningful changes.
4. Saranya teaches us about living life in a fearless manner despite the challenges to women's dignity. We learn that if girls play 'victim' it would be easier for the perpetrators of the crime to further subjugate them and that a voice can transform hearts while silence can shut the door to that transformation both in self and the community. Saranya understands quite well how women can be empowered through SHGs. More on women empowerment through SHGs can be found at [8].

From all these women we can learn about leadership. They are leaders in their own unique ways and are contributing towards society leveraging their life's experiences. Instead of getting bogged down due to tribulations and live life in despair, they made a choice to live to the fullest and uplift others in the process. The crowning lesson is that of showing mettle in tough circumstances is. All of them had to battle vagaries and struggles in life but they did not allow themselves to be defined by them, instead they put up a bold face and tried to learn from their experiences and become stronger women. They have not only made their own lives better and obtained a livelihood - a very small part of who they are, but created a mark in the history of the world. Such stories leave an indelible mark upon the heart of anyone who hears them and the one who meets them is forever transformed. It has been almost two years that I met Ratna and Ramabai but time has not been able to erase the lessons I learnt from them. I do not meet Archana or Saranya regularly but I know that they are creating a better world by their hard work and sincerity every single day. Its almost as if I was woken up from my deep slumber after meeting them. They have taught me the most important lesson of my life, **"Literacy is not education. Educated is the one who leverages his literacy to contribute towards society and in that contribution even a small effort goes a long way."**

We need to talk about women like these to our youngsters in schools and colleges where the seed of inspiration is actually sowed and where that seed can attain the roots of a life of service. In the current world the focus of education has shifted more on job creation, which is by all means a very significant task, however, leadership building should not be compromised and should not become the fief of a select few. India has given birth to great women leaders, warriors and thinkers yet there are very few names which our children know to be able to emulate them or imbibe their characters in their own lives. These women I have talked about quintessentially challenged my education and forced me to look within and ask how I was being of service to the country and to my fellow men. After meeting them I realized that my responsibility was much bigger. I also learnt that the willingness to contribute trumps everything and that when the resolve meets action, that's when transformation in the society is heralded.

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