

Gamanam

Journey of Women Empowerment!

There are many visible and invisible challenges in a working woman's life; especially for a woman who works in rural areas. The array of challenges could be anything from lacking transport facilities to lacking toilet facilities to facing sexual harassment. Although women in social development sector are as competent as men, they still face gender discrimination and gender inequality at workplace. Unfortunately, many women do not openly speak about these challenges. While many social organisations work towards gender equality as an intervention, they do very little for their own women employees. The question remains how can women empower other women if they are not empowered themselves? These unspoken gender issues lead to high turnover of women staff, resulting in loss of resources and time, and organisation not being able to achieve its goals.

Gender inequality and discrimination are not limited to workplace alone; they are seen at home, at work and in society. Many men and women are not aware of these issues due to the deep-rooted conditioning culture and beliefs about the differential status and roles of men and women in the society. Unfortunately, these beliefs and conditioning relegate women into a disadvantaged and a lower position in all domains. Sometimes women unconsciously undervalue themselves due to these cultural influences. Though much work is being done to bring gender equity at home and at work, a lot more work needs to be done.

Accion Fraternal (AF) strongly believes and unequivocally supports gender equity in all aspects and policies of its functioning. AF has a gender policy with clear objectives of: 1) Promoting gender equity; 2) Establishing gender sensitive culture; 3) Promote equal participation by women in all activities; 4) Empower women to realise their full potential; and 5) Create a gender voice against all forms of discrimination. In its Human Resources policy AF gives priority to women. AF vigorously pursues to increase the number of women staff in general; and in middle and senior positions in particular. It gives priority to women in selections, promotions and career development. AF gives high priority to women farmers, and it implements the same with its staff.

AF works in 230 villages in 8 mandals in Anantapur District. Out of 120 staff in the organisation, 36 are women (30%). As a policy AF requires 50% women participation in all its Community Based Organisations (CBO) such as Sasya Mitra Group (SMG), Grama Sasya Mitra Samakhya (GSMS), Mandal Sasya Mitra Samakhays (MSMS) and Apex Sasya Mitra Samakhya (ASMS). AF has been working with about 15,000 women farmers and 15,000 men farmers as their family representatives. Majority of AF's women staff works in the villages alongside with their men colleagues and with farmers. To create a

conducive, enabling environment for its women staff, AF created an exclusive women's forum called "**Gamanam**". It means "**journey towards development**". The goal of Gamanam is to ensure gender equality within the organisation and to empower women employees with equal opportunities and enabling conditions for effective performance on and off the field.

Creation of Gamanam did not happen overnight. It was an evolutionary process. Waheeda from the central office explains, *"The seed for Gamanam was sown as early as in 2006. At that time women employees in the organisation were very few, only 12 or so. Women had difficulty in expressing challenges they faced in the field. To make women voice their challenges openly, and to create an enabling work atmosphere, a half-a-day meeting was started by the Director of AF. After a year or so slowly the meeting came to a halt, as a few members left the organisation."* As Ms. Kalamani, Gender Consultant explains, *"The organisation wanted to find out the reasons for the women staff turnover – whether it was solely due to personal reasons or due to work related issues. So a series of gender training sessions on gender issues were conducted for the entire staff in AF in order to help them understand and sensitise on gender issues and concept of gender equity. A gender training manual was developed over a period of one year in a participatory way to train women and men understand gender related issues. They also use it as a tool for training rural women with whom AF is working."*

When Gamanam started in November 2014, it was simply called as women's meeting. Rizwana, Convener of Gamanam, recalls, *"We felt there was a need to give a name to this forum, which would represent the true purpose and spirit of the forum. After brainstorming hundreds of names and short-listing a few for almost 3 months, we finally chose the name "Gamanam" as it represents our journey towards progress; for us it's a journey which strives for gender equity at work, at home and in society, transforming our lives. All women employees of AF, right from cooks to Socio-Technical Organisers (STO) to Planning Monitoring Evaluation Specialists (PME) are members of Gamanam. It took us 6 months to frame our objectives and develop a structure to the meeting. There is still a lot more work that needs to be done."* It's a bottom-up process, a natural process where challenges are discussed, solutions are brainstormed, and presented to the management for decision making. Ms. Kalamani, a Gender Consultant participates and mentors Gamanam in its functioning, and in framing policies. She also provides training, skill development, guidance and feedback. The Director of AF provides guidance and support as and when called for by Gamanam.

The objectives of Gamanam are to: 1) Act as an interface between organisational policy makers and women staff in creating favourable and enabling conditions for women employees; 2) Develop appropriate knowledge, attitude, behaviour and skills; 3) Advise the organisation on program policies to be gender-sensitive and gender-just; 4) Create

solidarity, unity and a collective voice against discrimination; and 5) Create a personal 'space' for sharing their problems, issues, and grievances and seek redressal.

Gamanam consists of a Focal Committee and 3 sub-committees. Committee members are chosen from different mandals, based on their skill level. The sub-committees are: 1) Planning and Implementation Committee; 2) Reporting Committee; and 3) Cultural Committee. Responsibilities of each committee are to develop various professional skills in women. Tenure of each committee leader is 2 years.

Focal Committee is the apex committee and has the overall responsibility for purposeful functioning of Gamanam. It identifies gender related issues/ policies within the organisation, organises training programs and has the operational responsibility of following up on issues, maintaining confidentiality in serious issues, providing guidance and steering Gamanam to achieve its objectives. The sub-committees help members develop facilitation and organization skills, communication and presentation skills so that they become more skilled and confident.

Women staff reports a lot of improvement in their social and organisational skills after they started Gamanam. Organising Gamanam meetings has improved their facilitation skills and helped them overcome stage-fear. Indira says, *"Initially only men colleagues used to present area and mandal reports and speak with farmers, while we didn't say much but simply watched the proceedings. We observed men mingle with other men easily and we felt a little isolated. After we started Gamanam, we feel confident that we can prepare reports and come forward to present them even before men can. We are also able to give and receive feedback from our peers. We are helping each other grow."* Facilitation, writing and presenting case studies on field work, and recording minutes have vastly improved their communication skills.

Gamanam Focal Committee had encouraged members to set some personal development goals to achieve during 2015. At the beginning of year 2016, all of them wrote down a few professional and personal goals they want to achieve during the year. Devika wrote down her goal as learning computer skills; Bhoolakshmi's goal was to support her sisters' education; Vijayalakshmi's goals were to learn to speak English, read newspapers regularly; while others' goals were anything from improving work performance to learning driving to improving communication skills, to stop procrastination. They say they were followed up, encouraged by their peer group, convener and mentor to work towards achieving their goals. When something is written down there is more accountability and motivation to achieve. Many report that they have achieved 75% of their goals, if not completely. Aruna says, *"My goal was to send my children to a better college and that required more money than what we had. Setting up this goal had helped me to explore available financial assistance options and loans, which I would not have known otherwise. I was able to provide that amount only*

because I set that goal.” This exercise had helped them to grow professionally and personally. At the end of the year they reflected on the reasons for successes and failures and set goals for the future. They say that the skills they learn in Gamanam are not just work related, but are life-skills indeed. This kind of learning is a continuous process being facilitated by Gamanam.

An Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) has been set up in AF to redress the grievances of gender discrimination and to provide a gender-friendly work environment to all employees. It consists of 4 members – 2 women and 2 men for gender balance. One human rights activist, who is not an employee of AF, is included in the team for objective and unbiased evaluation of any grievance. The committee had dealt with 2 sexual harassment cases in the organization in the last 2 years. In one case a male employee harassed a woman colleague by sending obscene phone messages and by calling. This was reported to ICC and a written complaint was taken by ICC. The woman employee complained about the harassment in Gamanam meeting also and several other women came forward to disclose that they too had received obscene messages from the same person. In another incident, a male colleague behaved indecently with a female colleague and she immediately complained to ICC. In both cases ICC enquired into the complaints from both sides and gave recommendations to the management for termination of those men employees’ services from the organisation. The management immediately terminated employment of those two men staff.

After these incidents, the Director gave a strong and clear message to the entire staff in an all staff meeting that sexual harassment in any form will not be tolerated at any cost and serious action will be taken against offenders. Since then there is a change in men’s behaviour towards women colleagues. Susheela, STO, voices her views, *“ This is due to the absolute support we have from the management regarding eliminating sexual harassment and gender inequality. Now men are on alert when they talk to us and behave properly. They do not pass any comments on us or on our competency. They know that we are members of Gamanam forum and we can confront them. So they are careful and don’t cross their limits. Our families are also comfortable when we work in the field because of management’s support for us.”* In another incident when outsiders harassed an AF employee, police help was taken and offenders were given a warning. Women are coached on how to conduct themselves at workplace and practice safety measures. Ms. Kalamani, Gender Consultant, educates women employees on various laws and rights pertaining to women in Gamanam meetings. AF policies against gender discrimination and sexual harassment are reinforced in all staff meeting every month. Information about help-lines of other women forums such as “Bhoomika” are given at mandal level meetings and steps are being taken to prevent any harassment. Spreading awareness about women’s rights through role plays, organising talks by police and

lawyers during events such as International Women's Day and other campaigns are some of the other activities taken up by Gamanam.

Many employee-benefit policies already existed in AF before Gamanam came into existence, but staff was not aware of them. Gamanam was able to disseminate information about these policies to staff, such as length of maternity leave, interest-free loans to purchase two-wheelers (for transport), preference to spouses of employees in employment opportunities, and women staff being given preference for housing in the campus, etc. Gamanam was successful in influencing a couple of organisational policies. Women employees had transportation problem when the meetings extended into late nights. Gamanam instituted two changes; 1) not to extend area level meetings beyond 8pm; and 2) to provide office transport to women when they have to work late during big events. Gamanam is working on including gender element in all of AF field activities. It has also asked the management in central office to provide a waiting area for women and to relocate restrooms for women to a different place. Currently it is focusing more on skill development and confidence building in women staff.

Gamanam is still evolving and there are a few areas which it is working on. One such area is strengthening decision making and leadership skills in women. AF organises big events such as World Water Day, Ecology Days, etc. and many internal committees are formed for smooth execution of such events. Gamanam encourages women staff to be proactive and take up leadership roles in organising such events. They will be able to put facilitation and organization skills they learn in Gamanam meetings to use and taking part in such events will increase their confidence. Gamanam encourages women staff to take equal responsibility along with their men colleagues in all areas of functioning and establish their own identity. In Gamanam meetings members are exploring ways by which they can independently visit farmers' fields and monitor performance closely.

The change in gender perspective is not limited to women staff alone. As a part of gender equality initiative, AF conducted a survey in 8 mandals in year 2016 to know the challenges women farmers were facing. The results showed that there are more than 4,000 women headed families in the project area. Jyothirmai shares her experience, *"There are a lot of single women and many people try to exploit or dominate them. These women share their problems with us, be it about discrimination, sexual harassment, government pensions or about ration cards, etc. When we listen, respect and involve them in decision making, it makes a huge difference to them because earlier their voice was not heard."* As a result of the survey findings, AF is now developing bank linkages for women, verifying eligibility criteria and planning to obtain finance for income-generating activities for women besides sustainable agricultural initiatives. Bhagyalakshmi shares another interesting transformation among women farmers.

“Initially mostly men used to take part in discussions in the CBOs. There was no involvement from women. Husbands used accompany wives to the meeting and talk. When we spoke about gender equity both men and women used to argue that how can they be equal. We tried to develop rapport, understand their perceptions, problems and be empathetic. Due to the continuous trainings and dialogue with them, we are seeing a shift in women’s and men’s attitude. Now women are more participative in programs and in decision making in CBOs and, they take ownership in programs.” Gamanam also disseminates information about Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch (MAKAM) to women farmers.

Gamanam meeting happens on 2nd Saturday of every month at the central office in Anantapur. It is attended by all women staff from the project area and central office. Women STOs take turns in facilitating the meeting, presenting previous meeting minutes and recording minutes. Area-wise issues, both program and gender are discussed, progress is reviewed and future action plans drawn. Case studies about successful women farmers are presented and feedback is given. Many inputs are provided by the Convener, Gender Consultant and other women staff. Issues requiring advocacy, or other serious issues are later presented to the Director for further action. But it’s not all business – members infuse energy into the meeting with inspiring songs, teamwork, games and energizers. This is a forum where women employees freely exchange, share, learn and also celebrate.

Many women employees report that their outlook has changed after Gamanam meetings have started. Their confidence and self-esteem have gone up. They are able to voice their opinions freely in families and influence family decisions to some extent. Now family members are asking for their inputs and opinions and there is more respect and reliance on these women. There is more support from parents to single women in their career. However, in the case of married women although awareness on women’s rights has increased, some women are trying to strike a work-family balance.

The impact of Gamanam on its women employees is evident in many aspects of AF functioning. As Convener Rizwana says, *“Women openly sharing a serious issue like sexual harassment was possible only because management provided such space and support through Gamanam for its employees. If such a thing had happened earlier, either the woman would have suffered quietly or quit the job without disclosing the real reason.”* Some women are recruited soon after their studies without prior work experience, therefore lack professional skills. In addition to providing skill development, top priority in Gamanam is to build self-confidence and self-esteem among its members. It’s a platform where women openly share and pursue their challenges, celebrate successes, learn more and grow individually and collectively. As Devika, an STO says, *“There is no other place which empowers women like this by bringing us together.”*

There is collective strength as we come together as a group. There are many common problems we face in the field, in families and in society, and we discuss them here. Somebody here may offer a solution that is useful for the rest. We feel empowered here. We work in the field with women farmers, so whatever we learn here is very useful for us in the field. We share our learning with them, which in turn empowers them too!"

When Savitramma, from housekeeping, says in a clear voice, "*Earlier I couldn't ask the guests to keep their rooms clean; but now I have no hesitation in asking them to cooperate with me*", it is clear that **Gamanam** (journey) is not limited only to the educated staff but every woman in AF is on- board!