

Women in the Driver's Seat

If one gets down in Anantapur town bus stand or at the town centre, one may find Nallamma or Sarawasthi or Hameeda, all women, ready to drive passengers to their destination in their autos. An autorikshaw (generally referred to as an 'auto') is a three-wheeled vehicle, a mini cab, used for transportation of passengers. Traditionally autos are driven by men and it is unusual to find women in this occupation, but a few women in Anantapur have decided to be in the driver's seat, with support from Accion Fraterna (AF)!

It all started in April 2015 when Accion Fraterna (AF), District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) and Rural Development and Self-Employment Training Institute (RUDSETI) came together and decided to provide women auto driving as an innovative and unconventional livelihood for poor rural women. The 3 organisations have complementary strengths and competencies for such an initiative. The DRDA and AF together persuaded 18 rural women from neighbouring villages of Anantapur town for this purpose. These 18 women were a diverse group, some were single and some were married; some went to high school while others stopped at primary school. But they all had one common goal: to support themselves and their families with higher earnings and with dignity. AF runs 3 driving schools- 2 in Light Motor Vehicles (LMV) and 1 in Heavy Motor Vehicles (HMV). AF developed a curriculum for Auto driving and trained these women for 30 days in its driving school at Anantapur. The curriculum included both theory and practice sessions. The theory part included detail explanation about mechanical parts of the auto, changing tires independently, checking the engine, driver controls, precautions while changing gears, clutch, spare parts, etc. The practical part included driving sessions, controlling the auto, reading road signs, using indicators, horns, and so on. Rigorous training was given from morning to evening to all these 18 women. Besides ground practice, real time practice was also given on the roads in Anantapur town. Training was given not only in subject matter but also in customer service and personality development. Further they were taught karate for self-defence as well. The women had no prior experience in driving but they were determined to succeed at any cost. Saraswathi was one such candidate who studied only until 4th standard, yet she learned everything taught in theory with the help of the instructor and peers. Such was their determination that even when one woman fell-off while learning to drive, and sustained bruises, she showed up the following day on time! Prior to their actual driving test they were taken to the Regional Transport Office (RTO) for a mock test. Once their test was over and they got their driving licenses, they were raring to go!

The next big step was to procure autos for them. RUDSETI and DRDA had liaised with Syndicate Bank for securing loans for autos. Each Auto cost Rs. 154,000 and they availed a Government subsidy of Rs. 77,000 to 93,000 depending on their eligibility

facilitated by DRDA. Food & Civil Supplies Minister Paritala Sunita, Syndicate Bank Managers, AF Director and other officials were present at the inauguration ceremony when the women were given autos. Thus, they started their journey from being daily wage earners to being independent auto drivers!

However, their journey was not without speed breakers. During their training they faced a lot of criticism and resistance from their family members. As Nallamma says *“My husband, children, brothers, everybody was totally against the idea of I becoming an auto driver. My husband had stopped giving me money for daily transport of Rs.100 to AF after 10 days of training. He said if I bring an auto home, he would pour petrol on it and burn it. But I didn’t give up. I pawned my gold earrings to a moneylender, borrowed money and paid for transport.”* Fellow men auto drivers did not spare them either. They ridiculed them initially for choosing an occupation that is traditionally dominated by men. As Hasmast Biwi says, *“Initially men auto drivers could not believe that we, women, could drive autos as well as them. Later they complained that we are competing with them, and that they are losing respect of their wives at home.”*

These women normally drive within Anantapur town and to nearby villages such as Atmakur, Bukkarayasamudram, and Papampalli. Potential for higher earnings is definitely a motivating factor that led them to choose this occupation. Hameeda Banu says *“I earn approximately Rs. 600 per day (or approximately Rs. 16,000-18,000 per month). I am repaying Rs. 4,000 per month as bank loan and I save another Rs. 5,000 in a savings group. Remaining money I keep for minor repairs of auto and other expenses. Earlier I used to do tailoring, which was very laborious. I used to earn only Rs. 150 working from morning to night and suffered with back pain because of that. Now in the same hours I am able to earn much more.”* Nallamma from Papampalli village earns Rs. 800 to Rs. 1000 per day as she operates between Atmakur village and Anantapur town, about 30 Km; and in between a village with popular temples where many women with children visit. One woman auto driver got a contract to take children to school and drop them back at home after school. Women are saving mostly for their children’s education, weddings and other household expenses. All of them have paid 14 instalments of bank loans so far. Vehicle insurance cost is added to the outstanding loan amount.

Initially men auto drivers, police and passengers – all were equally surprised to see women auto drivers on the road. Men auto drivers ridiculed them, police advised them to stick to more traditional occupations like tailoring or cooking, and male passengers wondered if these autos are only for women passengers! As time progressed people came to accept women auto drivers and police also supported them by giving first preference to them in boarding passengers. These women gained self-confidence with practice and became adept at driving. Now they are able to manage their vehicles

effectively, taking care of small repairs and changing tires by themselves. They usually stop driving in the evening to return home to take care of household responsibilities. For self-defence they keep a rod or stick and some chilli powder with them in the auto, but so far no untoward incidents have happened.

They say there are many advantages to women driving autos. As Bhagyalakshmi puts in *“There will be fewer accidents because we don’t drink and drive, we don’t over speed and we don’t overload passengers. Our families benefit immensely from our earnings because most men spend their earnings on alcohol and other vices, whereas we spend on our children’s education and welfare.”* As they became more assertive, they said domestic violence against them has also reduced. Now many other women aspire to be auto drivers. This group also feels there is a need for more women drivers as it will strengthen the group and bring more respect and recognition in the society. As the next step, these women want to learn 4-wheeler (car) driving and become cab drivers. That will add to their income substantially. In these families now women are earning as much as, or sometimes, more than their husbands. While most families have accepted the changing role of women in the family, some women are still facing problems from family. Especially their husbands feel inferior and refuse to support them because these women are either earning more than them or doing a job which was considered a man’s job earlier.

All these women attribute their success to support from AF. As Saraswathi says, *“If it were not for RUDSETI and AF, we would have still remained as daily wage earners. This intervention has totally changed our lives. We are forever grateful to AF!”* One woman driver, Nallamma, got an award for her driving as a Best Entrepreneur. RUDSETI presented an award to her in Bengaluru and wrote a case study on her. Nallamma reclaimed her gold earrings with her earnings, which she had pawned earlier to learn driving. These women auto drivers showcase women empowerment in Anantapur. Women are in the driver’s seat literally and figuratively!