Rimjhim Jain Tells Us How On-Call Storytelling Rings In Gender Equality

Kishor Varta (http://www.chsj.org/ivrsv-kishor-varta.html) blends the age-old method of storytelling with the modern-day technology to reach out to rural people and spread awareness about various issues. It is the brainchild of the Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) implemented by a local partner organization, Manjari. Their primary goal is to reduce gender discrimination of girls and improve reproductive health knowledge among adolescents. They have been widely recognized and have received the Vodafone Foundation Mobile for Good Award (M4G) 2016, and sponsorship by the NASSCOM Foundation.

The Initiative has issued a toll-free number with IVRS (Interactive Voice Response System) where people can call to listen to the fictional stories. Currently, the four topics include gender inequality, child marriage, domestic violence and sex education: Lakhanpur Ka Raju, Dada ka Gussa, Haldi Ki Jaldi and Dulhan Ki Batein.

लखनपुर का राजू, भाग- 1 (Lakhanpur Ka Raju, Part- 1)

My conversation with Rimjhim Jain, the manager of Kishore Varta, turned out to be another tale where the good had won the evil.
Me: What inspired you to initiate this program?
Her: Two years ago, my colleagues Abhijeet Das and Satish Singh began working with an organization named Sahyog in UP. They used to educate women about their rights and the evil practices in the society. They realized that no progress would take place if they didn't involve men. These women went back home with a newly acquired point of view. However, when their husbands and brothers do not share the same, it leads to clashes and hostility. The development of women cannot take place until we show men what their daughters, mothers, and sisters are going through. We started giving extreme importance to educating men. This gave us an idea to initiate Kishore Vrata Program.

Today, the results are better than what we had hoped for. The males have been giving up social stereotypes and even have started sharing household chores. We educate them about gender inequality, domestic violence, reproductive rights and much more. People have started sharing their stories and opinions with us.

Me: How many calls do you receive in a day?
Her: I can't tell on a daily basis but on a monthly basis, we receive about 5 to 8 thousand calls.

Me: What were the few emotional feedbacks that moved your team?
Her: One time when we were discussing reproductive health with boys of a co-ed school, they thought about it thoroughly and realized what a poor hygiene condition their school had and thus they decided to take the matter to school authorities and requested them to make separate, clean & hygienic toilets for boys and girls. This story of boys coming together for their female companions is very empowering.

Woah, the boys demanding the better infrastructure for girls! I now believe we have a bright future.
Me: How did your organization manage the high costs of IVRS technology?

Her: Initially, we used our leftover funds from various projects as this was supposed to be a pilot launch. We also integrated this program in other projects which helped us funding it. We have also won an award.

Me: How do you deal with the group of people who oppose this program?

Her: Our organization has been working in these areas for more than ten years now, so authorities and schools with which we work are quite familiar to us. Even gram panchayats and education department have given us the permission to collaborate with local communities and schools. So we did not spring out just like that, so we do not face much opposition. However, we were afraid that our bold characters may upset some people. But thankfully, the stories did not offend anyone.

Another problem we faced was a huge number of prank calls and call dropping. But we've been able to gain the trust of local people, students, and panchayats, which made sure our journey to influence people was smooth.
Me: Tell us about a new campaign you’re starting this year.

Her: In 2017, we will be relaunching the IVRS based phone call component of the Kishor Varta program in Bundi. What is more, the program this time will be creating Yuva Saathis or community level male peer leaders who will be using the Kishor Varta stories to generate changes in the discriminatory social norms across Bundi.

The program will thus be linked to the newly launched national campaign Ek Saath that aims to engage men and boys in changing gender discriminatory social practices. 12 lakh people have been reached out to by the Ek Saath campaign that was launched on November 25, 2016, in 10 states across the country by 135 civil society partner organizations in 100 districts. They will be termed Samanta Saathi and will be encouraged in bringing about gender-related changes at the grassroots level.

Guess who’s joining them?

Me: How successful do you think the Kishore Varta has been in removing the social stereotypes?

Her: I cannot tell for sure how successful our program has been so far but we have influenced a significant amount of people in a good way. A few years ago, we did a public discussion over the topic of domestic violence and child marriage. That discussion influenced villagers so much that they all stopped taking dowry and made a “Honda-free village.” In some places, change is instant; in some, change is slow. But the movement is taking over everywhere.

You can get in touch with Kishore Varta here (http://www.chsj.org/ivrs--kishor-varta.html). Here (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ehAqwjDZTg) you can see more videos of their stories.
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