

Breaking the Shackles of Child Labor

Ms. Swapna MAJUMDAR (India)

Gandla Malleshwari often saw other girls her age walking to school while she grazed cattle. Her parents had never sent her to school, and after her mother's death in 1999, when her father abandoned them, Malleshwari and her five siblings were taken to live with their mother's brother in a small village in the Ranga Reddy district in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

Here, too, her uncle did not consider education important and did not bother sending her to school. In fact, her uncle made her responsible for looking after his cows. It was herding the cattle that she would watch schoolgirls going to study. But the 11-year-old could only yearn to be like them. Little did she know that her life was about to change.

Around this time in 1999, volunteers of MV Foundation, a non-governmental organization based in Hyderabad, the capital of city of Andhra Pradesh, that works to bring children back to school, were mapping out-of-school children in Ranga Reddy district. During this exercise they heard about Malleshwari.

When they went to meet her and found that Malleshwari was interested in studying, they persuaded her uncle to allow her to join their residential bridge course camp (RBC) so that she could be mainstreamed into an age-appropriate class in a government school. After a year of studying in the RBC, Malleshwari was mainstreamed into Class 7 in a nearby government school.

Since then, there has been no looking back. Hard work, determination and talent made 2010 a watershed year for Malleshwari. Not only did she complete her college graduation, she was also hired as a camerawoman by HMTV, a Hyderabad-based vernacular TV news channel. She was the first woman to be chosen as a camerawoman in the entire state.



Ms. Gandla Malleshwari

For a poor girl rescued from child labor, this was a big moment in her life. "I used to herd goats and cows. I never thought I would be able to study. But once I was given the opportunity, I was determined to make the best of it. I wanted to show that I was no less than others," she pointed out.

Having become economically independent, Malleshwari was able to support the education of her younger siblings. But she wanted to help other children like herself who were forced to work because of poverty and lack of opportunities to study. She facilitated a program on child labor while working in HMTV. This program prompted the MV Foundation to start a helpline for children in difficult circumstances. After its launch, the helpline led to the rescue of a number of children forced into child labor. Malleshwari has helped their cause by highlighting their cases in her coverage of the news and ensured that the rescued children were admitted to RBCs.

Malleshwari has become an icon for many children rescued from child labor. Her own story has also been published in regional newspapers published from Andhra Pradesh. However, 23-year-old Malleshwari, who earns a monthly salary of Rs 16,000, (USD 320), is not resting on her laurels.

She is focusing more on social issues in her work with Telangana News Network, a local TV channel based in Hyderabad. She is also raising awareness on child labor through songs. A good singer, Malleshwari has recorded 11 albums on child-related issues as well as devotional songs. She also speaks at public platforms about how her life changed because of education. "I know what life is like without education. I want to help as many children as possible who are deprived of education, and for that, I am ready to use whichever medium I can to achieve this goal," she said.