

Charting a new course

These courageous women from rural Maharashtra are breaking taboos and finding their feet in traditionally male-dominated occupations

On the surface, Mallika Shikalgar, Vanita Sonawane, Tabassum Pathan, Rohini Garud and Sunita Khataavkar might appear to be very different. However, what all of these remarkable women have in common is how they have managed to carve a space for themselves in conventionally male-dominated professions – from knife sharpening to watch repairing and from goat farming to leatherwork. Here are their stories.

TABASSUM PATHAN (28), Vaduj, Watch repair



When customers walk into the clock-and-watch retail and repair shop run by Tabassum and her husband Arif Pathan, and don't see a male attendant, they ask Tabassum when they should come back. When she tells them she can do the repair work herself, they are surprised. It's been six years that Tabassum has been handling all the repair work at the shop in Vaduj. From changing the belt and glass to fixing the PCB board or any other part, Tabassum can handle it all.

The shop was started two decades ago by her husband. Though he needed a helping hand in the shop because of his increasing work load, he did not ask Tabassum to join him during the initial years of their marriage because she was busy with their first child. Six years ago, Tabassum decided to join him. "Instead of just manning the shop, I wanted to do something constructive. So I asked my husband to teach me how to repair watches and clocks. It took me a year to learn," she recollects.

It was Tabassum's idea to expand the business further. Around five years ago, when she approached the Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank for a loan, she also learnt about the organisation's training programmes and workshops for women entrepreneurs. "I learned about expanding my business, time-management as well as improving my sales skills. Since then, I have repaid three loans from Mann Deshi. I have expanded our shop and also added different types of clocks and watches. There has been a substantial increase in our monthly income," says Tabassum proudly, adding that in order to ensure her children get the best education, she wants to earn more so that the family can eventually relocate to Pune.

Tabassum says, "I used to be very introverted and an inhibited person. Although I quickly picked up the skill on how to repair various instruments from my husband, building customer rapport was something I was nervous about. In the workshops that I attended in Vaduj and Mhaswad, I interacted with a lot of women and heard their business stories. Now I feel more confident when I deal with people."

Tabassum's husband Arif takes pride in the fact that his wife has become an expert at a job that is usually done by men. He also admires the way she balances both work and family responsibilities. "There are times when I am away but I know that she will manage our shop single-handedly. I have seen her grow as an individual - from a timid, shy housewife to a confident businesswoman. In the future, if I venture into some other business, I have full confidence that we will be equal partners and that together we can always be successful," Arif says proudly.

MALLIKA SHIKALGAR (54), Vaduj, Iron tools sharpening



There was a time when Mallika Shikalgar used to be unsure about where her next meal would come from. Managing expenses for her home of eight children on her meager income gave her regular nightmares. Today, she earns nearly Rs 800–1000 per day. She has educated all her kids, and each one is earning well for themselves. Mallika's journey over the past three decades has been tough; but she has always proven to be tougher.

In the late 1990s, Mallika's husband and father-in-law used to earn well. They had a stationary shop in Vaduj, an iron tools sharpening shop in Mumbai and a third shop in Karad. Life took an unfortunate turn when her father-in-law got falsely implicated in a legal case and the family's entire earnings were drained by fighting the case. Her husband stopped supporting the family financially and was rarely at home. "We reached a point when we were forced to make do with Rs. 15-20 rupees for our daily expenses. That's when I decided to shift the sharpening machine from Mumbai to Vaduj, where we stayed. I learned how to sharpen tools on my own and began to take odd jobs. The very first day, I earned Rs 80 and realized that if I worked hard through the day, I could earn enough to support my family," recollects Mallika.

Within a few years, she added another business. She bought bangles from the wholesale market with her savings and started selling them from door-to-door. However, since this took time away from her sharpening work, her cumulative earnings fell. She then approached the Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank for a loan to set up a small bangle shop. Her sharpening machine now stands outside the bangle shop and she has repaid several loans that have helped expand both her businesses successfully.

"The biggest lesson I have learnt is that there is no better teacher than tough times. Today when I look back, I realize I have come a long way. I am happy that I was able to educate my children and make them financially independent," says Mallika.

SUNITA KHATAVKAR (45), Chandrapur, Pottery



About a decade ago, when Sunita Khatavkar expressed her desire to join her family's pottery business, her husband and in-laws dissuaded her. Her neighbors and relatives ridiculed her. "Women don't work at the wheel," they said. So in the afternoons, when her husband and father-in-law return home for their lunch and quick siesta, Sunita would try her hand at the wheel. Having closely watched her

husband and father-in-law for years, she didn't find it too difficult to mould and shape the clay. "Sometimes, I would secretly remake the product my husband or father-in-law had made just before going for lunch. And they could never tell the difference!" laughs Sunita. This went on for a few years.

One day, the Zilla Parishad of Chandrapur organized a round of training programmes for Self Help Groups (SHGs) in her village Pusegaon. This included pottery. Sunita enrolled for a six-month course, which her family reluctantly allowed. After she was officially 'trained', she started openly making clay items. But selling her products was quite challenging.

Disheartened, she was about to quit. In 2014, she attended a Mann Deshi Foundation orientation session where she learned that the organization helped women like her improve their marketing, customer relations, product display and pricing. She reworked her collection and added utensils, *agarbatti* stand, diyas, jars, human figurines and bowls. The Mann Deshi team encouraged her to set up a stall at their bi-annual exhibition in Satara. To her surprise, she not only sold all the items but also made a profit of Rs 5,000. Since then, she has participated in many exhibitions in Satara and Mumbai and her income has kept increasing. This year, at the Mann Deshi Rural Mahotsav she made a profit of Rs 25,000. "Today, my husband and in-laws are very proud of my achievements," smiles Sunita.

VANITA SONAWANE (40), Satara, Leather tanning



Until 2013, Vanita does not remember a single month when she and her husband were not in debt to someone. Her husband's meager monthly earnings as a leather tanner – Rs 500 to Rs 1,000 – made it difficult to make the ends meet. Their financial situation was so bad that the Sonawanes pulled both

their sons out of school and put them to work. One of their sons started working in a garage, and the other joined his father's profession.

It was then that Vanita decided to learn the business of leather tanning; an expertise which is usually reserved for men, especially since it involved a rather complicated and chemical process. A quick learner, Vanita easily picked up the skill. "I did not have the time to worry about whether it is a male profession or not. I had to work for my family," she says. The Sonawanes would get the raw material of goat's skin from Hyderabad and work on it before sending it to Mumbai. Unfortunately, even though now there were more hands on deck, their family income didn't increase significantly and were drained by the end of the month. They continued to be forced to borrow regularly.

The turning point came in 2012 when Vanita heard about Mann Deshi Foundation's programmes. "I applied for a loan of Rs 10,000 and bought a large consignment of raw material from Hyderabad. This allowed her to significantly increase her profit margin, since profits are tied to bulk orders. So far, I have repaid half a dozen loans from Mann Deshi and our monthly profit ranges between Rs 10,000 to Rs 11,000," says Vanita, who dreams of growing her business further.

ROHINI GARUD (40), Phaltan, Poultry & goat farming



Rohini Garud was always keen to work and be financially independent. One day, while visiting the Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank, where she had a saving account, she learned about various agri-workshops that the Foundation offered. Since the family already had some poultry and livestock, Rohini decided to expand this business. She attended four workshops and learned about the different varieties of goats and sheep, their diet, health and about the basics of poultry farming. The workshops also covered topics such as public speaking, self development, business development and money management. Her husband, a farmer, gave Rohini a small piece of land to run her business and grow fodder.

"The very first time, I bought a pregnant goat, she soon delivered two kids. After they matured, I sold them in the weekly market and made a pretty decent profit.

Now, twice a year, I buy 100 chicks and raise them for three months before selling them. I sell eggs too," says Rohini. She makes an annual income of about Rs 50,000.

Rohini is now keen to expand the variety of the breeds she offers – of both poultry and goats. She manages her business single-handedly – whether it's carrying the goats and hens to the market or bargaining with customers. "Many people are surprised that I manage everything. Some also ask me why, despite my having completed high school, I do this work. I tell them no work is too big or small. What is important is that I am not dependent on anyone financially," she smiles.