



## ***WOMEN'S WORK:*** **How Pratham is Challenging Tradition to Get More Women Employed in India**

By Sarita Gupta *February 2016*

Jet lagged, I wake up in pre-dawn Delhi and switch on my phone. Ellen Barry's [harrowing account](#) of the women in a village less than 50 miles away who are fighting for their right to earn a living fills my screen. The women are up against a patriarchal social order, communal ostracism, and physical violence. I recognize the forces arrayed against them: I have just heard echoes of the same from young women participating in a Pratham program. Luckily for them however, Pratham is fully prepared to fight alongside them.

A statistic in Barry's article jolts me more fully awake: only 27% of the women in

India participate in the labor force. This is marginally better than Saudi Arabia or Pakistan—yet the perception among urbanized Indians and the diaspora is so radically different. We are a democracy, we claim, and women have equal status to men under the law. The battle however that poor, un- or semi-educated women face is not with the government; it is with their husbands, brothers and neighbors.

Pratham is well known for its efforts to eradicate child illiteracy in India. Lesser known is the work it has been doing for the past several years in providing vocational training to marginalized

youth, and placing them in entry-level jobs. After all, what is the point of passing high school if your prospects for earning a living wage are next to nil? Pratham has partnered with giants such as the Taj Group of Hotels and Larson and Turbo to help fill the hospitality and construction industries' enormous appetite for semi-skilled labor. The program has been a huge success, but not as much for women. Many Indian parents refuse to have their daughters take up a job, no matter how lucrative, if it is far from home or one in which they will come into regular contact with men.



In response Pratham has organized vocational training in trades more palatable to conservative families: tailoring, beautician, and bedside assistance. I had just spent an afternoon at the Adarsh Nagar health care center in northwest Delhi, far from the lush green and stately city center that most visitors experience. The center trains young women, and some men, to become bedside assistants or nurse's aides. A class was in session: 8 young

women and 2 men were trying to identify medical instruments and tag them with their proper names in English. The instructor patiently watched as they dispatched a large unruly pile, leaving one tag on the desk. "Who is holding the curette?" she called out, and the group began to review their handiwork all over again. The entry-level requirement is 10<sup>th</sup> pass, so the trainees all know a smattering of English.

The Pratham center in Adarsh Nagar is just under a year old. The staff consists of a mobilizer who goes door-to-door convincing families to send their daughters for the training, and another who visits hospitals and clinics securing placement opportunities. Using an innovative Learn Now, Pay Later scheme, the training is free of charge and the fees of approximately \$200 are deducted over a period of time after the trainees begin working. The starting salary is INR 3,000-5,000 a month, which effectively doubles or triples the typical family's earnings.

The issues that Barry cites in her article about a tiny, closed community plague these young women as well: parents refusing to allow a daughter to go to school because they believe an education beyond learning to read and write is unnecessary; brother forbidding his sister from traveling to a job; husband reluctant to have his wife work in the first place.

The Pratham center's dynamic director, Arifa Khan, spends a lot of time with families, encouraging them to visit the center and see exactly the environment their girls will be in. She and the other staff are proud to be able to say to the

families, “We are the same as you, from the same community. Look at us. If we can work and earn with dignity, so can your girls” .



The Pratham course consists of one month of classroom instruction and two months of on-the-job training at nearby institutions. The OJT trainees come to the center weekly to share experiences, and I sat in on a session. The difference between this group and the one just starting its classroom instruction next door was palpable. These young women exuded confidence and spoke with the nonchalance affected by health care professionals everywhere about assisting with an amputation, changing pus-filled dressings, and treating hacking coughs.

The chief complaint seemed to be placements where there was not enough patient interaction. These women are hungry to learn and impatient to begin earning on their own.

According to the Indian government, 93% of the labor force has no formal training. This is highly problematic in health care as untrained or inadequately trained staff can compromise patient care and safety. Pratham’s program is small, with 16 healthcare centers across India that have trained 3,000 women so far. The aim is to expand to 50 centers and train 10,000 annually. A drop in the bucket overall but what it means to individual lives is enormous. As one young girl told me proudly, “ First I had to convince my parents to let me finish 8<sup>th</sup> pass. Then I had to fight to get into this training. Soon I’ll be earning. I will save the money to get my nursing certificate. No one will be able to stop me then.”

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