



A weaver at work at Bharat Mata Kusht Ashram, a MESH supplier in Haryana State, adjacent to Delhi.

JOB SATISFACTION

A nurse by profession, Bonney left her native Britain in 1978 to work at a leprosy hospital in Andhra Pradesh. After two and a half years, she moved to a self-settled colony near the hospital where she spent the next 15 years.

There she became involved in all aspects of colony life, including rehabilitation efforts. At her suggestion, women weavers who had been making bed webbing stitched the strips of cloth together to make bags, which Bonney arranged to be sold through a fair trade organization. In due course she came into contact with MESH, where she is now happily ensconced.

"Seeing people who didn't have much do a little better" is how she describes the job satisfaction that MESH provides. She cites the example of a man who makes ceramic piggy banks. He used to be a burden on his family after leprosy left him with bent fingers, but a combination of reconstructive surgery and the development of a new product line for export to TLM Trading has given him a good living. "It's changed his life," said Bonney.

The piggy-bank maker was helped by a TLM project, one that closely involves MESH, to seek out disabled artisans in traditional crafts communities and bring them back into the workforce. "This is quite different from what we did before, when we looked for disabled people who were already in

hospitals or colonies, and who had learned a craft," says Bonney.

MESH also encourages groups working with marginalized people to include the disabled and the leprosy affected. Bonney once turned down an approach by a group working with HIV/AIDS widows and poor rural women to sell its products because it didn't include any people with disabilities. "But I told them, 'Since you are working with marginalized people, why not take the most marginalized, who are the disabled?'" She is pleased to report that they now make up 30% of the group's workforce.

If there's a downside to MESH's growing success, it's that the standards it has put in place for exports make its products more expensive on the domestic market, where the "fair trade" tag is not a selling point. "We face a dilemma," admits Bonney, who says MESH will have to come up with a strategy to make people with disposable income aware of what it does. "We clearly cannot compete with sweatshops and the influx of Chinese-made goods because our concern is fair income for the artisans with whom we work."

But in a sign that MESH is doing lots of things right, the colony to which it traces back its beginnings no longer has need of the support MESH provided for so long. For Bonney, it's the best endorsement MESH can have. "That's our dream," she says. "Real rehabilitation." ■

GLRA KOLKATA

SEWING FOR EMPOWERMENT



At the Kolkata branch of the German Leprosy and TB Relief Association (GLRA), women affected by leprosy are being taught sewing and knitting skills with a view to securing them a source of income.

Since the program began last year, the GLRA has trained some 220 women — both those who have had leprosy and others who come from a leprosy-affected household.

The GLRA pays for their bus fare and lunch for the duration of their training, then loans them a small amount of capital to help them go into business. Many use this to buy a sewing machine, which the GLRA sells them at a discounted price by buying in bulk from the manufacturer.

Taught in groups of between 10 and 22, the women train for a minimum of three months, or longer if other skills such as stitching and craft-making are involved. Priority is given to the disabled and the poor.

Although men are also admitted, there are more places for women because they are in "double jeopardy," explains GLRA's Sudhakar Bandyopadhyay. "If a husband gets leprosy, his wife must look after him. If a wife gets leprosy, the

husband looks for a new wife."

"Our goal is to help these women make a financial contribution if they are still living with the family, or to enable them to stand on their own two feet."

The GLRA buys the raw materials the trainees work with from a person affected by leprosy, a cloth wholesaler who buys scraps from a garment factory. These are fashioned into baby clothes, bags and other items, which are sold to shopkeepers who sell them at the local market.

One of the most satisfying aspects of the program is seeing the change that comes over the women as they gain in confidence, says Sudhakar. "They arrive with pale, drawn expressions. But then they are inspired and start smiling. They regain their dignity."