

Skilling in the time of COVID-19

Rangoonwala Foundation (India) Trust's online trainings with a vocational focus helped many who had lost touch regain their skills as well as confidence, increasing earning potential



Community volunteers and entrepreneurs join hands to improve sanitation and hygiene.

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown up enormous challenges for lives as well as livelihoods. It is said Mumbai never sleeps, but the pandemic induced lockdown brought a sudden pause in many ways. For many, living 'inside the house' was a new experience. Most homes in Mumbai's slums are not large enough to hold the whole family together at a time. Dwindling resources, no avenues to borrow and mental stress made survival a challenge for many.

Being a people-centric organisation working with communities to achieve inclusive and sustainable

development, Rangoonwala Foundation (India) Trust-RF(I) draws its strength from the never-say-die spirit of the people it works within Mumbai's bastis.

Where there was a will to overcome, it now saw hopelessness. It saw women trying to hold their families together despite many odds. Pivoting to keep up with the changing realities seemed the only option.

Before the pandemic, its six Rangoonwala Community Centres in the western suburbs of Mumbai were bustling physical spaces in the midst

of congested slums, which women and children could easily access to focus on their capacity building and health needs.

Skilling has been an integral part of its interventions. While entrepreneurship was a choice before, it now had become a necessity. Incomes which families grudgingly considered supplementary before became a ray of hope for survival in the new normal.

Necessity helped surmount the technological divide. Online, network, data pack etc. were integrated with the vocabulary and became a way

of life, be it with borrowed or shared smartphones. Virtual meetings replaced community meetings and online trainings replaced centre-based ones. Its efforts in tweaking skill training modules and training methodology where ever possible are showing results.

Given that working from home was becoming the way of life, it focused on online computer trainings with a vocational focus. A range of trainings helped those who had lost touch regain their skills as well as confidence, increasing income earning potential. Its community youth have found these trainings of immense value.

For women who had some basic mehendi application and beautician skills, it started online trainings which included COVID-19 safety protocols for self and clients. Kits are given to trainees at the end of the training to support entrepreneurship. Its mehendi artists were invited to apply mehendi at a wedding as soon as the lockdown eased giving much-needed incomes and more importantly many more contacts! The most empowering experience in these times has been that of its women entrepreneurs who learnt to make cleaning materials of commercial quality –

phenol, liquid floor and toilet cleaners and liquid bleach.

This was a new initiative for RF(I)T. The pandemic brought into sharp focus the dismal state of sanitation and hygiene in community toilets. At times, COVID-19 positive patients were also using the same facilities as others because there were no options. RF(I)T started processes to make people aware of the impact of these conditions on health. Groups of women showed interest in monitoring this.

Simultaneously it started processes to train economically vulnerable women to make the cleaning materials combined with entrepreneurship training – sourcing, costing, packaging, marketing.

Today, this small but growing group of women volunteers and entrepreneurs ensure hygiene at more than 100 community toilets in the bastis. The entrepreneurs are steadily building a dedicated clientele. Building skills around utility products and services that do not require much resource investment and in a city like Mumbai do

not occupy space for material and equipment in small homes have a better chance of translating to incomes and hence building lives in these trying times.

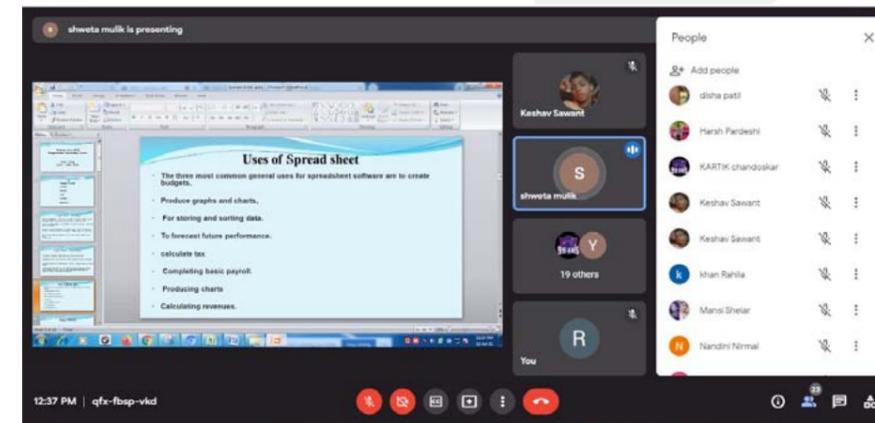
“RF(I)T believes that building skills in women paves the way for their empowerment – social as well as economic. It brings a sense of self-worth, enhances their esteem in the family and social circle and is a tool in her kitty for earned income,” says Nisreen Ebrahim, CEO, Ragoonwala Foundation (India) Trust.



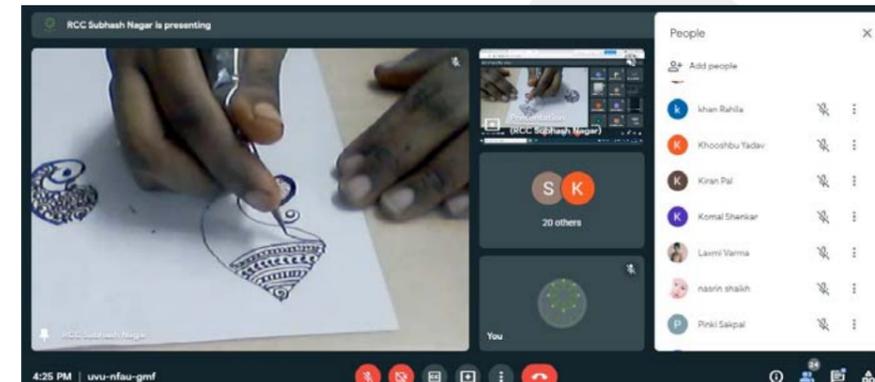
Entrepreneurship training for cleaning materials.



Online beautician training in progress.



Online computer training in progress.



Online mehendi training in progress.