



Récit de Willo, Volontaire de Solidarité Internationale

"No thanks, only love"

Is definitely one of the sentences that I heard the most during my volunteering in India. I did not hear it only from one inspiring woman, but from a few of them who are empowering other women through income generating activities for protection of the environment. These women are developing bio-farming as well as safe, sustainable, affordable and user-friendly sanitation technologies such as biogas plant. They are ensuring the sustainability of water resources and their stories are as much singular as they are connected.

Sreeja is a young mother of two children. Just like many women in this coastal village of Kerala, she always wakes up before sunrise and starts her day by taking care of all the housework, prepares the children, washes their clothes, makes breakfast and lunch for the entire family. Once she drops her kids at the bus stand for school, she can finally get ready to go to work. Here, another journey starts. Because of the tsunami that hit the area in 2004, the roads are very often in maintenance and buses not always running for Sreeja. Sometimes she would come by rickshaw, quite expensive for the distance to cover, rarely she would come cycling for the same reasons, frequently she would try her luck hitchhiking, with all the risks that it still implies for a single woman anywhere in the world.

Although Geetha's journey takes a different road, it includes the same obstacles. Geetha never gets much sleep as to fulfill her role as a daughter, mother, wife and housewife she sleeps late and wakes up early. She needs a job though, to offer the best future to her two boys, complete the pension of her husband and feed the family. She also needs her salary to keep paying back the loan for the family business and other expenses such as her transport to the office and her sophisticated clothes to remain elegant in every situation.

Athira's story only differs from Sreeja and Geetha's ones because she graduated in civil engineering, still lives with her family and does not have children. Yet she also needs to find a good job matching to the level of her studies and the expectations and hope of her family for her to have a better future and form a family.

Sreeja, Geetha and Athira could be any women but they are not because they decided to give their time, energy, strengths, love, friendship and put their hope in the fight against climate change and for the protection of their environment. To that purpose, they decided to join an association specialized in women empowerment through the development of sustainable agriculture, microenterprises, rural housing and education. But who says association might also says uncertainty of the sustainability of funds, of the projects, of the structure and therefore of the employment of the workforce including Sreeja, Geetha and Athira.

Despite the relatively low income that their association is able to provide to its employees, despite the uncertainty of such a small but steady revenue for them and notwithstanding the lack of visibility regarding the durability of their work, the three of them have decided to engage for this cause of





women empowerment and the protection of their living environment.

Sreeja, Geetha and Athira are sources of inspiration because despite all this uncertainty and the potential lack of recognition of their involvement on environmental projects, despite their absorbing personal life, they are still the ones making the difference for everyone at the end of the day.

Everyday, Sreeja would be the first to reach the office. She would be the first on the field as she would be the first wondering

if others are fine. She is the one who would tell people to sit at her place without mentioning that she is tired or that she has body pain. And every time she would help others, if you want to thank her she would remind you, No thanks, only love.

With no safety net in case of any problem happening in her family, Geetha would still be the one smiling, singing and motivating everyone in all situations, may it be joyful, solemn, unfortunate or sad. May it be related to work or to personal life, she would help everyone to find hope and strength in any situation, and if you try to be grateful she would also tell you, No thanks, only love.

Eventually, though Athira would like to joke and do not ask for gratefulness neither for love but for money, she would make you understand as well that nothing is really more important than supporting others. Thus, regardless the pressure of the world, she is among those who have decided to do something useful, powerful and impactful for people.

I discovered this so called philosophy of « No thanks, only love » not only with them but with many other women entrepreneurs of Kudumbashree, the world-known programme of poverty eradication and women empowerment of the Government of Kerala. All of them have their stories, fears, hopes, joys, sorrows. But all of them have the same strengths, resilience, generosity, skills and power to promote women empowerment and clean environment, to build and sell biogas plant, clean canals, grow and sell organic vegetables, with the support of Sreeja, Geetha and Athira.

Despite the diversity of their personalities and the competition for work, all of them are gathering to make this world a better place, not only for themselves but for all men and women by increasing the recognition of women's work, especially towards the promotion of women entrepreneurship through the protection of the environment. They are proving themselves as the best way to achieve gender equality and several other sustainable development goals such as no poverty, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, climate action and life on land.

Despite all their constraints that they accept without any question, these women are still the ones who are finding time for others even when there is no time, they are the ones who will comfort you for your loss and they are also the ones who will give you more than what they get for themselves.

Sreeja, Geetha, Athira and Kudumbashree members are making a difference to empower women through



the protection of the environment, more than I could ever do and for that, they will remain a source of inspiration.

WILLO

