

“EMPOWERED WOMEN *are the best* CHANGE MAKERS”

ZARINA SCREWVALA believes in ensuring that progress and empowerment are achieved by one and all. She tells **Radhika Sathe-Patwardhan** how she is achieving that and more through the Swades Foundation



Empowerment is the key to a better future, and the Swades Foundation is ensuring that rural India is being empowered via holistic and sustainable growth using its unique 360-degree model. Zarina Screwvala co-founded the foundation with Ronnie Screwvala, and she is also its managing trustee and director. Apart from her work with Swades, she is also the co-founder of the media company UTV where—among other ventures—she has created many TV channels like Hungama, Bindass and UTV Movies. She is also a member of the UN Women Business Sector Advisory Council (BSAC). In an interview with *Femina*, she shared more about her work with Swades Foundation, lockdown, and being a changemaker.

Tell us about the vision of Swades Foundation.

Ronnie and I have a dream to lift one million

people in rural India out of poverty. Today, we have a force of 270+ full-time staff, most of whom live and work in the villages, and thousands of community volunteers, impacting over five lakh people. We have a unique holistic model of development with interventions in water and sanitation, health, livelihoods, and education.

We believe poverty is both material and mental, and, while, sometimes, it is possible to remove material poverty, mental poverty remains. To us, mental poverty is a lack of hope, the inability to dream of a better world. The key to Swades Foundation is to create a ‘can-do’ attitude in our communities. ‘Swa Se Bane Des’ (I make my country) is what we believe in and what we tell them all the time! And, today, after six years, I am deeply proud of the thousands of village development committees, hundreds of Swades Swaraksha Mitras, or voluntary health workers, mostly ladies, who are our true heroes, and show us what a truly empowered India looks like.

“THE KEY
TO SWADES
FOUNDATION
IS TO CREATE
A ‘CAN-DO’
ATTITUDE
IN OUR
COMMUNITIES”



Clockwise from left: a woman at her farm, at an eye camp and Zarina and Ronnie at a meet

What has been the main learning of the foundation in its work with women?

Women can be economically independent when they have water in their homes. Women and their oldest daughters often walk for two to three hours every day to fetch water. Once we completed our water interventions—and they got a water source available nearby—women had free time and started to practise poultry, goat-farming, dairy and other livelihood opportunities.

A toilet is also a necessity for women to safeguard their health and dignity. Twenty years ago, when we started going to our villages, we met women who defecated in open fields before sunrise and then after sunset! For them, snake bites were common, and they developed kidney issues and urinary tract infections. By building more than 24,000 toilets, we have enabled our communities to live life with dignity and respect.

During our initial visits, only men were actively participating in the meetings, but, within two years, we had an equal number of women participating as well. They were actively taking charge of the development of their villages.

Recently, tribal women from Dharechiwadi, Poladpur in Maharashtra banned the sale and purchase of illegal alcohol in their village with support from the police.

We all know empowered women are the best changemakers. For instance, our Swades Mitras are community health volunteers who go door-to-door helping their village with primary healthcare. They are truly exemplary role models, and a source of inspiration for many women.

Can you share an instance showcasing the success of Swades's work?

Let me share the example of Kasarwadi, a village in Maharashtra. The Village Development Committee (VDC) here is led by women. We have an intensive training session followed by a little test for every VDC before we start to work with their village—this test allows them to prove to themselves and us that they can convene the community for a cause. They decided that each house should prepare a healthy meal, and roped in their *anganwadi* worker to conduct a nutrition awareness session. Later, they arranged for our eye-care van—that goes door-to-door to conduct tests—to come to their village for screening. They also invited residents from 12 nearby hamlets for the eye screening. The impact of that day was massive on the residents of the other hamlets and, finally, they also agreed to form a VDC in their village. The VDC also prioritised the economic development of the poorest of poor households.

One more example is of Bhavshetwadi, a tribal hamlet, where people were extremely shy and hesitant at first. After attending the meets, they were early adopters of the Swades mason training programme. Today, they are a registered vendor with Swades for building sanitation units! >

WOMEN AND
THEIR OLDEST
DAUGHTERS
OFTEN WALK
FOR TWO TO
THREE HOURS
EVERY DAY TO
FETCH WATER.



During the lockdown, what were the hurdles that the foundation faced and how did you overcome them?

I'm proud to say that, after just two weeks during which we were uncertain about how to proceed, we started to plan and work and went full steam ahead initially with 14 brave volunteers. Today, our entire team is back at work in Raigad, as well as in our new block, Nashik. We have all safeguards in place, and I am happy to report that, so far, all our team members are well and safe.

I believe this work is a true testament to the resilience of the wonderful Swades team, as well as several large donors who have come forward and, above all, a testament to the empowered communities we have built.

We began by getting connected with all our 1,000+ VDCs to ensure they were safe and had basic amenities. Through them, we were able to help with a massive food aid scheme, and

Above: Zarina at one of the villages; below: an ongoing session

**"GIVE
YOUR TIME,
VOLUNTEER,
OR START
AT HOME,
HELPING
THOSE
YOU CAN;
TEACH YOUR
CHILDREN
TO GIVE"**

distributed over 17,000 grocery and daily essential kits to over 10,000 of the poorest families whose daily wages were impacted by COVID-19. We were also hit by the Nisarga Cyclone and, as part of that relief, provided solar lights to 400+ VDCs and 350+ individual households. The value of our unique idea of VDCs truly became clear during these difficult times.

How do you manage a work-life balance with so many things on your plate?

I enjoy working hard, I love to study, reflect on the day's learnings, try to see where I could have done better. I also enjoy reading, playing with my dog, being with my husband, friends and family. I make time for what is needed.

As a changemaker who has made a difference, what would you say drives you? And what advice do you have for other women?

I am driven by a strong need to help others. If we can, then we really should... it is truly a source of real happiness. You don't need to be old or rich to give; everyone has something to give. Give your time, volunteer, or start at home, helping those you can; teach your children to give. Once you experience the joy of giving, you will not stop!

What are the changes that you'd like to see in the coming future?

I think 2020 brought many eye-opening learnings. Many people I speak with have had the time to reflect on what really matters to them, to ask questions that perhaps they never had the time for earlier. Questions about whether life has a purpose, whether things happen for a reason, whether life is a random series of unrelated, separate happenings, and, importantly, whether their actions make any difference. If you believe, as I do, that life has a purpose and meaning, that what we do matters, that our thoughts, words and deeds carry some significance and meaning, that they impact our own life and that of others, then one needs to act accordingly. I think we need to recognise how much we are all connected, and responsible for one another. The immediate outcome of this thought is to help to overcome this crisis by alleviating the pain of the most vulnerable. Help wherever and however you can. Start with those around you and expand your circle of caring as wide as you can. Remember it might not always be money that is needed but something else. **F**