

The Mary Fran Myers Award, 2007



Prema Gopalan
2007 Recipient of the Mary Fran Myers Award

As the Executive Director of Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) for over 15 years, Prema Gopalan has supported poor rural women in building bridges with local government to facilitate democratic processes that are inclusive of women. The impact of Prema's work is clearly demonstrated by the experience of SSP after the Marathwada earthquake of 1993. The Maharashtra government enlisted SSP to catalyze residents in 300 villages to learn, cooperate, and apply new technology and construction techniques, and their remaining government subsidies, to rapidly repair their damaged homes. When SSP's initial appraisal found that village officials and homeowners lacked basic information and opportunities to participate in reconstruction, Prema quickly determined that the women's savings and credit groups, although largely defunct, could be reactivated as community organizations that could inspire and engage large numbers of women to lead their community's repair and reconstruction. Since then, the efforts of SSP in Maharashtra to engage women's groups in reconstruction efforts have established a platform of peer learning exchanges enabling other earthquake impacted communities of women around the world to learn from these strategies. In earthquake and tsunami areas, Prema has supported women who mobilized to organize their communities to restore housing, livelihoods, community infrastructure and basic services, participate in reconstruction and create new, empowered spaces for women to continue their development activities after reconstruction was completed. In 1999, Swayam Shikshan Prayog, with Prema Gopalan's leadership, supported grassroots leaders from Maharashtra to share their experience with women in 8 earthquake devastated communities in the Marmara region of Turkey. In Gujarat, after the 2001 earthquake, Prema took a delegation of Maharashtra women leaders and SSP staff on a humanitarian/solidarity visit. Gujarat women were so moved by receiving a delegation of peer leaders who had survived similar situations, that they urged the women's groups and SSP to return and come and assist them. This process was repeated, when the tsunami struck Tamil Nadu at the end of 2004. In all of these cases, Prema took care to work only in communities that invited them in, seeing the value of a women-led relief and reconstruction process. Last year, SSP partnered with more than 42,000 women organized in autonomous community groups in 889 disaster-impacted villages in three states in India.

Under Prema's leadership, the SSP has partnered with GROOTS International, an international network of grassroots women, and served as their secretariat. In this role, she has facilitated the creation of training teams of expert grassroots community women leaders. These women-led teams are now available to support and build the capacity of women's groups in high risk and disaster struck low-income communities across the globe. These efforts have been widely recognized as a model of good practice in the field. For these initiatives and for her sustained work with and on behalf of grassroots women, Prema is recognized as an expert in community driven, gender equitable disaster response and resilience initiatives which help transform the chaos of disasters into opportunities for women to lead and restore their communities.

For More details, please visit: http://www.gdnonline.org/mfm_award_2007.htm