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20-plus years of service to women's sexual health

Ethnographer Sethulakshmi Johnson was one of the recipients of the Brew Women Awards 2017 held recently



● **Roshne B**

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—Sethulakshmi Johnson

It was a long time calling for Sethulakshmi Johnson, an ethnographer, to serve society. Inspired and mentored by social workers-cum-seniors from her alma-mater, Stella Maris, the then sociology graduate realised that her heart drove her to work with communities that were vulnerable to HIV. Now, 20 years later, Sethulakshmi, who has been working as the Program Manager at YR Gaitonde Centre for AIDS Research and Education (YRGCARE), received the 'Inspire and Conquer Brew Women Awards 2017' in recognition to her contribution. In a tete-a-tete with *City Express* the ethnographer narrates her journey...

Her journey in YRG since 1997 has been in the areas of HIV, reproductive health, sexual health

and other issues, which are still a taboo. "My college seniors shaped me into who I am today! Working in a community, managing teams and making sure that goals are reached and being part of a bigger family has been extremely satisfying and a learning process for me," she shares.

From working alongside sex workers, talking and creating awareness on the ethos of health and HIV to creating a better life for injunctive drug users in Kasimedu area, Sethulakshmi has done it all. Recalling the initial phase of her work, she says, "Working in college for social work is different from actually seeing what happens at the grassroots level. There are people who do drugs, drink alcohol in front of you and you have to accept them for what they are," she says.

Women have played an important role in her life. "Their resilience when they live with drug addict

husbands while trying to ensure that he has an abuse-free life is inspiring. These women are strong willed...they want to support the family and take their husband to rehab. This touched a raw nerve in me. Despite the challenges and hardships, they smile. I won't be able to forget anyone I met nor the experiences I have had," she smiles.

Ask her a defining moment in her career and she recalls being part of a research project where she had to work with sex workers. "At the end of the research, we had to derive the HIV ratio among sex workers. But my defining moment...these women were confident they would not be affected by HIV. I asked how they were so sure and they beamed that they knew how to tackle, negotiate with a man and ensure he used a condom...they have a family to go back and tend to. They have children and they consciously

don't compromise their health for anything. To have a sex worker tell me the entire ethos of HIV in a nut shell, without having knowledge about it, changed me," she shares.

Today Sethulakshmi has the credit of playing a pivotal role in the growth and promotion of the foundation's livelihood and food security initiative. 'ECO Kitchen' addresses economic stability within families affected by socio-economic challenges. "The organisation has paved the way to promote the quality of life of women and, I am thankful that I have had the opportunity of working with women and sub-groups to give them a dignified, violence-free life," she adds.

Crediting her family for supporting her over the years, she adds, "I have a great family which has never questioned my passion for the work I do. They just know who I am from the heart!"