

For discussion at the March 16, 2018 iZōsh Event, from Johanna Ryan, keynote speaker

Mushrooming Empowerment

Only the chirping of birds and the distant moo of cattle can be heard in the little village of Hembarawa in central Sri Lanka. Sujeewa isn't at home, but her elderly mother is having a stroll in their small garden while their dog takes a nap on a chair. To an outsider, it wouldn't seem obvious that within this tiny garden is a mini industry that helps feed a family of five.

A short while later, 42 year old Sujeewa returns home. She's just returned from a school in the area where she helps cater meals for 113 students. She's only at home for a short while as she has yet another business to go to – the 'Gemi Idiriya' (a government run water project) – where she earns 4,000 rupees (USD 26) a month as the project book keeper. With all demands in Sujeewa's day-to-day life it's a wonder how she'd have time to manage a business of her own.

She leads me to a tiny 5ft by 8ft room situated in the garden. From the outside it looks like a very small single bedroom, but on closer inspection it's evident that it's meant for something else. With green netting reinforcements and a lock on the door, she's trying to keep something out.

Sujeewa opens the door to a cool well-shaded storeroom that holds close to a thousand clear bundles of compost neatly arranged, a few have mushrooms sprouting from their sides!

"I don't let anyone enter this room" She says pointing at the reinforcements around the room, "All of this is meshed and kept dark to make sure it's the best climate for growth and to keep certain insects and contaminants out".

Yield on mushroom farming can vary from time to time but can still provide a sufficient income for Sujeewa and her family. "I usually can make around 20 packets of mushroom a day. Today I was able to packet and distribute to a few shops at 60 rupees (\$0.40) a packet. It's quite easy if you know what you're doing. I always say that you have to look after a business as you would a baby if you want it to grow". In addition to running the business herself, Sujeewa also sells starter packs for those interested in creating a similar business and educates buyers on how to make their business sustainable.

"I give these readymade packs for Rs. 35 (\$0.25) so it's a great opportunity for others to start a business of their own. While instructing buyers, I tell them that they need to think about the little things – like how much it would cost to buy vegetables from the market and how much they could save by having home-grown mushrooms. If somebody fails after buying these pots, then it's only as a result of negligence."

Despite how easy it seems, Sujeewa too struggled at the beginning to get things up and running.

"I started off with 1,500 pots and had to get rid of the whole lot as they got spoiled! That didn't stop me though."

Sujeewa's daughters who are eight and sixteen years old, walk home from school hand in hand and run indoors. On the surface it seems that life couldn't be any easier, but according to Sujeewa who's

currently on her second loan cycle, the VisionFund loan has helped her cope with some very challenging times.

“The financial burden of all this came at once. The capital to start a business is quite high. My loan officers had to critically assess me for a Rs.150,000 (\$980) loan. Part of my loan was spent on coaching my youngest for her scholarship exams. My eldest has now finished her Ordinary Level examinations and is awaiting her results. While she is waiting, she is studying English and Tamil and following a course at the Asian Institute of Technology. My husband is unwell at the moment and is receiving treatment for kidney trouble at an ayurvedic hospital but I still haven’t missed a single loan payment”.

Sujeewa says that her next goal is to empower underprivileged women through this business.

“As a woman, I feel that we can do much more than we give ourselves credit for. You might fail the first time around, but you can’t get insight and experience in an instance. You need to look past the failures and learn from them. I would like to see girls who have married early learning this business. It doesn’t take a lot of work to do this. All you have to do is take my advice and you will be successful.”