



## Support in the face of strife, virtually

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Express News Service

**Nandini Azad** |

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CHENNAI: Success stories of small-time women entrepreneurs, narratives of female leaders from the margins, of micro-entrepreneurship, changing livelihoods, changed lives, solidarity among women in cooperatives, sisterhood and governance. Last week, the Working Women's Forum (WWF)-Indian Cooperative Network for Women (ICNW), led by its president Nandini Azad, made history by organising the 65th edition of United Nations Commission on the Status of Women virtual parallel event Destitution to Global Leadership: The Iconic Working Women's Forum (India) from Chennai for the first time.

The event brought to fore the contributions and impact of the women-led organisation to a global audience. "Here (in WWF), we are taught the tenet 'uzhaibe uyarvu' (hard work is key to growth). I was once just a member of the organisation but now, years later, I am a leader.

I have drawn strength and courage from their training and now, I stand up for what's right. I am now equipped with the knowledge and the confidence to make a change," said Padmavathi, a tea-shop owner and member of the Forum, sharing her story to the audience, as part of the virtual event.

The stories of Lakshmi, a vegetable vendor, and Shanthi, a weaver, who established a weaving unit at her house after her husband's demise with the financial support from the Forum, were among the several inspiring narratives that dotted the two-hour-long event. Held for the past 64 years from the United Nations headquarters, Nandini Azad shared the honour of being able to host it from Chennai and revealed the Forum's plans of setting up global resource centres (virtual) for women from informal sectors.

Delivering the inaugural address, Daniela Bas, director of, Division for Inclusive Social Development, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, said, "Cooperatives provide a good model for the way forward while building back, especially after a period like the pandemic, as they distribute profits equitably. Cooperatives promote social inclusion, support change by creating ownership and contribute towards promoting

sustainable development. They are truly people-centred and planet-sensitive. I am glad that the WWF is setting an example for more women to take leadership positions despite their age and abilities. The cooperatives help the world build back better.”

In her keynote address, Simel Esim, head, Cooperatives Unit, International Labour Organisation, Geneva, addressing the importance of cooperatives, said, “As places of economic democracy, cooperatives provide an opportunity for women to engage in decision making. In a time where social and cultural norms may restrict a woman’s engagement in the public sphere, the emergence of women-led and women-only cooperatives can help those from the ilk overcome this. It also provides several learning opportunities.” Adding how institutions like the WWF in India are critical for the sustainability of women-led cooperatives, she shared, “They can provide a range of essential services such as property management, training, legal advice and access to markets. They also advocate for the rights of women in rural and informal economies.”

Andreas Kappes, secretary-general, International Raiffeisen Union; Maria Peres, chair of the Gender Equality Committee of the International Cooperative Alliance; Chitose Arai, JCCU vice-chairperson of the International Cooperative Alliance for the Asia Pacific; Haruyoshi Amano, the head of the International Division Tokyo of the JCCU, and Neerja Mishra, social activist, among others, were present.