

# She puts past behind to help others

## A CSR Volunteer, Sumitra Speaks Up For Victims Of Domestic Violence

Deeksha Chopra | TNN

**New Delhi:** She is not afraid to accompany a rape victim to the police station in the middle of the night when no one from her village comes forward. A messiah for other women in Kishangarh village near Vasant Kunj, 53-year-old Sumitra Devi was herself a victim of domestic violence for 15 long years.

For the past 20 years Sumitra has worked as a volunteer in the core counselling team of Centre for Social Research (CSR) and has fought for the rights of women suffering from domestic violence.

With an alcoholic and abusive husband and four children to raise at the young age

of 18, Sumitra has led a difficult life. "In our family women were not supposed to step out of the house or raise their voice against the atrocities of the menfolk. My husband would get drunk and beat me every night. I was treated like an animal, at times even tied next to the cows in the shed. My husband would spend all his money on alcohol while I stitched clothes and did embroidery to feed my children. My kids studied in government schools and are earning well now," said Sumitra.

After many years of suffering, Sumitra decided to approach a CSR centre in Kishangarh village. While the coun-



**HEALING TOUCH:** She has been fighting for women's rights for the past 20 years

sellors gave her husband the much needed dressing down, she got the confidence to stand on her own feet. Not only did she become more aware of her rights but also made it her mission to help other women.

In 1989, she became a volunteer with CSR. "I've helped around 500 women

from different villages, including Masoodpuri, Mahipalpur, Rijokri, Ghitorni, Mehrauli, Lado Sarai and Kishangarh. I went to several houses and left pamphlets with a phone number women could call on. These women are uneducated and hesitate to come forward. Since I was one of them they

readily approached me and I forwarded their complaints to CSR. I also tried counselling their families and was successful in many cases."

From helping women in court matters to accompanying them to police stations, Sumitra had the resilience to even stand up against a rude police officer: "I once accompanied a woman whose daughter was raped by the father in Trilokpuri, to the police station to file an FIR. We were made to wait for three hours with the officer showing no urgency to register our complaint. As I raised my voice the cop held me by my collar. After a heated argument, our complaint was finally registered," she said.

Hardships have toughened the grandmother of four. Today, Sumitra enjoys a comfortable life and stays independently in a house partitioned between her two sons. She also travelled to Australia in 1998 on the occasion of International Women's Day with CSR and was given a certificate for her contribution in the field of social service to women along with a prize money of 10,000 US dollars. She donated Rs 5,000 to CSR to give as compensation to domestic violence victims.

Educated only up to class 10, Sumitra encourages women of her community to study. "My English is very weak. I realised it's importance when I visited Australia. I'm learning English from my grandchildren at this age, but it's tough," she chuckled.

deeksha.chopra@timesgroup.com