

In the words of Sunita Kashyap: “We believe in trade, not aid”

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Sunita Kashyap. Photo: UN Women/Deepak Malik

Sunita Kashyap, is the secretary and founder of Mahila Umang Producers Company (Umang), an organization run by rural women in the districts of Almora and Ranikhet, in the Indian state of Uttarakhand. Locally owned by women farmers and producers, Umang sells knitwear and organic jams and jellies. In addition to selling the produce, Umang supports its members through micro-credit, used for education of family members, improvement of livestock, or other household needs. Recently, Kashyap participated in the National Consultation held in New Delhi, India, organized by UN Women, the National Commission for Women (Government of India) and MAKAAAM (Forum for the Rights of Women Farmers). The consultation was the culmination of a year-long process of grassroots engagement, leading to a Roadmap for Action, which was presented to the Indian Minister of Agriculture and Farmer's Welfare and senior government representatives. It emphasized the need to adopt transformative actions to support the livelihoods of rural women from the most marginalized communities. Here, Kashyap, reiterated her belief in trade, and demanded reduced taxes for women's collectives to effectively participate in value chains and get income security. "I am everything to Umang, and I'm also nothing (on my own). That's how Umang is, for every single woman. We come together and collectively impact our lives. Twenty years ago, during the founding of Umang, I was a high-school graduate and a home-maker. Even though I was actively involved in farming with my husband, I wasn't seen a "farmer"; my contribution was not considered on equal terms. But things changed when Umang became a part of my life. Gradually, I completed a Bachelors and then a Master's degree. Along with knitting and farming, that I was already adept at, I learnt to manage the accounts for Umang, conduct complex calculations and oversee customer relations. When I started working for Umang, I had promised myself to conduct my household duties with the same diligence as before. I bought thirty glasses for my mother-in-law, so that she wouldn't have to wash the dishes while I was away during the day, because washing dishes was in my share of household tasks. These are the ideals of positive family building that Umang supports. Whenever our members experience family problems, we try to counsel them and their families, and help them achieve a better balance in their work and life. We believe in building a sustainable life and ensuring consistent income for rural women. Earlier, women would farm the land, and the crops would be sold through middlemen. Women had to travel a considerable distance through the mountains just to reach the middlemen. Umang provides us with opportunities to become entrepreneurs. We have built self-help groups in all the villages, and the women farmers work within these groups. The fact that women are making and selling their produce, auditing the self-help groups and keeping the books and accounts, make for a sustainable model. Umang started with only three members in 2001, and now there are 3,000 women who are involved in sustainable farming, producing and selling their own goods. I, along with the others, have become entrepreneurs, bankers and auditors. We are all shareholders in the company, and we use the money we earn for micro-credit, as a bank would. We managed a turnover of around INR 4 crore (over USD 600,000) this year! However, with the recent modifications in the tax system in India, we are incurring huge losses. We have to pay tax before the product is sold, irrespective of its sale. I am here at this conference to articulate the problems that we face. We are a sustainable, strong organization, but we are still a rural women's self-help group! For us, sustainability is a long-term solution to the problems of the women farmers. At Umang, we believe in trade, not aid." First published by

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