Monica Singh lives in Brajarapur village in Purulia, a region west of Kolkata in the east Indian state of West Bengal. At age 34, she has two daughters and a son with her husband, Sahemram. The family owns a small plot of land, and in a rare year with a good amount of rain, Monica was able to grow enough rice to feed the family for only 4-5 months. In a bad year, which was more common, the rice lasted for 3 months or less.

To earn enough income to feed themselves for the remaining months, Monica and her family were forced to migrate over 95 miles from their home twice a year. In Burdwan, to the east, they would work long hours to earn just enough to feed themselves each day. While Monica tried whatever she could to feed her family, their lack of reliable income meant she could not afford to send her children to school. She dreamed of a better life for them.

When Monica received her grant from Trickle Up, she invested it in her agricultural activities. With help from Trickle Up and our local partner, Jamgoria Sevabrata (JS), Monica diversified in more difficult but profitable crops, including bitter gourd, pumpkin, watermelon, eggplant, and French beans. She selected these crops during her livelihood planning process with her livelihood coach, and budgeted a certain amount of seed capital for each crop based on its potential profit. She also purchased a sprayer to more efficiently give nutrients to her crops, as well as two goats. Previously, she grew only maize and rice using traditional, inefficient techniques.

As part of her participation with Trickle Up, Monica joined together with a group of other women from her village to form a self-help group (SHG) where they could save some of their profits, take out low interest loans to grow their livelihoods and help one another through problems and share advice.
After one season, Monica counted the profits she earned from each crop: 3,000 rupees (Rs) from bitter gourd, 3,000 Rs from pumpkin, 9,000 Rs from watermelon, 6,000 Rs from eggplant, and 5,500 from French beans. She also sold the goats for a profit of 4,400 Rs. In total, Monica earned 31,500 Rs or over $500, thanks to her diligence and a little help from Trickle Up.

With her profits, Monica was able to send her children to school, replace her straw roof with sturdier tin, and purchase another goat and two calves. Thanks to the skills she gained through the program, Monica is now able to grow rice paddy on land that she couldn’t previously cultivate and grow more challenging crops, significantly increasing her family’s ability to eat more and better foods.

The strong relationships Monica built with the group of women in her savings group have provided her with a social support system she didn’t have before. In fact, her confidence and success earned her a place of leadership. In April, 2015, she was elected her SHG’s livelihood mentor. She is responsible for monitoring the activities of each of the 16 members of her SHG. Her fellow group members are engaged in diverse activities, including small business, agriculture, vegetable vending, and rope production. If a group member has a problem, Monica is available to help them solve it or to ask for help from JS staff.

She was also elected to represent her group in the Sanchayita council, a governing body with representatives from SHGs from ten neighboring villages. The council meets once a month to discuss important local issues and challenges faced by the SHGs. Women who were once reserved and alone have boisterous conversations and make decisions that affect their entire communities.

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The women recently completed a year-long gender justice project through which they learned about their legal rights and recourses for fighting domestic violence and other gender injustice. Domestic violence in the area is all too common, as is early marriage, dowry expectations, and other traditional practices that disempower girls and women. The members of the Sanchayita council have become well known for their knowledge and courage to promote gender justice. Women from outside of their SHGs often come to the meetings to ask for help with personal challenges.

Monica enjoys her leadership role in her SHG and the Sanchayita council. She tries to maintain strategic levels of production among the SHG members in order to keep prices high. She is also building a system to sell the members’ produce in bulk to vendors in order to negotiate better rates. She says: “I am very happy to have this responsibility because I am also learning a lot. I can maintain my own production while also helping others. Now I am doing more cultivation than before.”

Read more stories like Monica’s at trickleup.org