

INSPIRATION

Meet the young changemaker who is driving tech-driven education in government schools in Karnataka

By Rekha Balakrishnan | 20th Oct 2020



Ashwini Doddalingappanavar, an implementation associate with the Meghshala Trust, is one among 10 women featured in Lenovo's New Realities project. She is a changemaker enabling tech-driven education in government schools in Karnataka.



Ashwini Doddalingappanavar was 15-years-old when her parents started discussing her marriage. Hailing from a small village called **Kurugovinakoppa** in the Hubballi region of Karnataka, it was an uphill task for the young girl to complete her education, join the Meghshala Trust, and become a changemaker in her own right. With every step, there was a hurdle to cross, stereotypes to break, and mindsets to change.

In just two-and-a-half years, Ashwini, now 23, and her work has been featured in Lenovo's *New Realities* Project, that gives a voice to 10 amazing women who are changing the world and using technology to drive empathy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Championed by the **UN's Girl Up foundation and international filmmaker Ava DuVernay**, an immersive 360-degree VR movie directed by **Phil Harper**, it depicts the story of Ashwini, her struggles, and how she is an inspiration for the girls in her village and the region.

The need to stand on her own feet



Ashwini shooting the video

After a lot of convincing, Ashwini managed to complete her BA in English Literature in 2017 in a small town near her village. But she found she was lacking in a number of skills, imperative for a job. Her parents had not let their guard down and were still pressurising her to get married.

After a lot of discussions, arguments, and another round of convincing, she approached the Deshpande Foundation for a four-month course in soft skills with just Rs 5,000 in her pocket. That would be hardly enough for the fees and for hostel stay.

In a conversation with HerStory, Ashwini recalls, "My parents thought it was a waste of time spending on a girl's education. But I was determined. I approached the authorities and told them this is the money I have and I would like to complete the course in two months. They agreed and I joined the senior batch and learned computers, picked up English speaking skills and soft skills."

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On completion of the course, Ashwini received a job offer from The Meghshala Trust, a non-profit charitable trust in the field of education.

"It's a very interesting story of how Ashwini came across in the interviews. What struck us was her tenacity. She kept reiterating that she wanted to make something of her life and stand on her own feet. Her determination won us over," says **Jaimala Kannan, International Operations Lead, Meghshala.**

The visit to Bengaluru for the final round of interviews would not have happened if Ashwini had not stuck to her stand. She says she went on a *satyagraha* of sorts, refusing to eat or drink, and her parents agreed after her brother, her pillar of support, convinced them that he would accompany her.

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Initially, Ashwini was posted in Hubballi, where she worked at the office with two men (another first for her!) and stayed in a PG. After completing her project, she shifted to Bengaluru to continue working on other initiatives.

As an implementation associate at Meghshala, the young changemaker visits a number of government schools every month to initiate teachers across Grade 1 to 8 into adopting technology for a better classroom experience. The Trust also works with governments in the North East in Manipur, Sikkim, and Meghalaya.

Meghshala has signed an MoU that offers content that aligns with the syllabus through an app and introduces it to teachers all over the state.

Jaimala explains, "Implementation associates like Ashwini work closely with the teachers by visiting schools, observing the teachers, and giving them feedback. They also present reports to district officials. The teachers undergo training three to four times in a year where they are explained the pedagogy behind the digital lessons and why it's done, and how to use the app and resources successfully."

Along the journey, Ashwini says she has evolved as a person. "For the first time, I was talking to strangers – teachers, government officials, and others. It was also for the first time I was living alone, away from family and villages. I was travelling through strange roads, trying to locate schools and implementing lessons. It has made me so confident that I feel I can now survive anywhere," she says.

On an average, Ashwini visits around 25 schools once or sometimes even twice in a month.

After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, she is now working from home, teaching the teachers online on how to use the app, make video lessons and send to the students.

A global changemaker



The video on her life has been another turning point.

"When I got to know about it, I was very afraid. Would they ask me to do some stunts?" she says with a laugh.

"I was also worried how it would be possible in our village, where the people are traditional and would not like to be a part of such things," she adds.

Phil Harper, the award-winning director and producer, who directed Ashwini's video for Lenovo's *New Realities*, says that just within 15 minutes of talking with her, he knew he had a great story.

"Her story is indicative of so many other young women across India who feel trapped by their economic circumstances. What's great about Ashwini's story is that no matter what challenges were in front of her, she always overcame them," she says.

Due to the pandemic, the film crew were not able to make it to her village to film, and though there was one attempt to get there, but right on cue, the lockdown started in Karnataka.

With a deadline looming and after a conversation with Ashwini, he decided to mail Ashwini a 360 camera to her and see what footage might start to come back.

"The nature of the 360 camera wasn't immediately understood. Ashwini would film people and think she wasn't in the shot, but of course she was always in the shot as we are working with 360 cameras. I worked with Ashwini over Zoom to guide her in how to use the 360 camera and what kinds of shots would be great for the film. She did an incredible job, and the footage that came back speaks for itself," he adds.

In just two-and-a-half years, not only has Ashwini's life changed for the better, but she has made her parents proud of her efforts. Talks of marriage now are a thing of the past she says.

What's more important has been the shift in attitudes of people in the village.

"Earlier, even watching something on the mobile phone was a taboo. Now that they see what I do with the help of a device, they treat me with respect."

Ashwini is also inspiring the girls in her village to dream big. "I believe there should be more awareness in the community to bring about change and the onus is on the girls too to speak up and take a stance," she says.

Meanwhile, she continues to make the change she wishes to see in this world.

Edited by Megha Reddy