

IKEA: EMPOWERING WOMEN, CHANGING CHILDREN'S LIVES

After a 90-minute drive to Ghanapur, a remote village in northern India, Mona Liss of IKEA United States felt as if she had stepped into a new reality. Liss and 25 other IKEA staff and UNICEF National Committee members from Austria, Canada, India, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States were met by more than 100 women clad in multicoloured saris. The visitors were given garlands of marigolds and embraced wholeheartedly.

Hardship is a way of life in a region with disproportionately high undernutrition rates, severe poverty, child labour and debt bequeathed from parent to child. But Liss soon learned that for the women of self-help groups in Ghanapur, reality is moderated by optimism, as the women are building a better future for themselves, their families and their children.

The self-help groups are a component of the Bal Adhikar project, an IKEA-supported initiative to prevent child labour in the state of Uttar Pradesh. As of November 2006, 1,613 groups had been established there, reaching 21,842 women. These groups provide women with a mechanism to control their financial resources, receive low-interest loans and generate savings. Women use these loans to repay unreasonably high-interest debts, to cover medical and household expenses, to send their children to school and to support income-generating projects.

In Ghanapur, one woman explained how the group collectively determined its most crucial priorities. Toilets with private washrooms were paramount. They pooled their resources and, with additional government funding, had 60 toilets built. This project, just one example of self-help group initiatives, empowered women financially and helped them realize their fundamental rights. The groups also provide shared platforms for increased awareness of birth registration, child nutrition, immunization, maternal health, and safe water and sanitation – and their vital relationship to children's rights.

The Bal Adhikar initiative, launched by IKEA and UNICEF in 2000, supports the Government of India's

commitment to prevent and reduce child labour. IKEA's support for this project translates into concrete action and a commitment to eliminate child labour from its supply chain.

Uttar Pradesh is home to an estimated 15 per cent of India's working children, and the carpet-weaving industry in this state produces more than 75 per cent of India's carpet exports. With the knowledge that child labour is one manifestation of a systemic cycle of poverty, debt and marginalization, the initiative aims to combat root causes – including poor women's reliance on their children to earn money – and to offer tangible alternatives.

The project also works directly with out-of-school children through 221 alternative learning centres. Since the informal education programmes began, some 9,300 children have acquired basic skills. IKEA also supports the government's immunization drives. With IKEA's funding, the government of Uttar Pradesh and UNICEF are providing 127,000 infants with immunization against the six most common childhood diseases.

The Uttar Pradesh project has continued to evolve, reaching 500 villages with a combined population of about 1.3 million. A third-party assessment of the project was completed in 2006, and UNICEF and IKEA are developing a five-year expansion strategy based on these findings.

IKEA has established a closely monitored code of conduct for all its suppliers. Utilizing its unique position to leverage change, IKEA has successfully raised industry standards and built trust within communities. In Uttar Pradesh, IKEA supported income-generating projects for women and encouraged suppliers to establish factories that provide good wages, benefits and job stability.

Over the past 10 years, IKEA has supported UNICEF programmes benefiting children and boosting their opportunities for learning in Africa, Asia, and Central and Eastern Europe, with donations exceeding \$25 million.