

SOCIETY

Creating a market for products by the differently-abled

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It is a busy time of the year for organisations and institutions that serve adults with disabilities. Some of them are racing against a deadline to meet the festival requirement from customers, which includes designing *torans*, *diyas*, eco-friendly bags, *potlis* and decorative candles.

At Rehoboth, a free home for the mentally-challenged destitute women, an average of 100 products are made every day – this is a steep rise from

earlier months when 50 are done. This centre at Paraniputhur, near Porur, is home to more than 150 destitute women, so it has the advantage of working on an order request from a customer on a need basis.

Of the 53 young adults on the rolls of the vocational unit at the Spastic Society of Tamilnadu (SPASTN), currently 10 who are fully vaccinated come to the centre on a staggered basis. Others have a parent collecting the materials from the institute and work on them from their home.

Shopping for products made by the differently-abled may be a gentle reminder to practise inclusiveness and for the producer, it is a big step toward being self-reliant and independent. However, the journey for those working to empower such adults is not easy.



Sumita Verghese, project coordinator, Rehoboth, says they look at the vocational skills picked up by their residents as “occupational therapy.” “Making profits selling products made by our residents is not our motive. Our larger aim is to mainstream these women,” says Sumita. She says fingers of these residents are not very deft and it is only with time that they improve.

Most of these institutions with vocational units ask for ample time before an order can be delivered.

At V-Excel Educational Trust, a number of products are made by the students in their two vocational units at Sastri Nagar and Mylapore. “But most of them have their mood swings and either do not turn up at the unit or refuse to work. So it is important to give them their space and, if need

be, show them other skills to break the monotony,” says Charumathi Sriram, vocational coordinator, V-Excel.

Sometimes letting them know where their work goes and the difference they bring to lives can generate new ideas. “In September, we took our students to Kuralagam, which is a big showroom for Navarathri shopping as we wanted to give them an experience of where their products go after they are made, how it is displayed at stores and help them understand shoppers’ preferences,” says Charumathi.

Capacity building

Non-profits like Special Needs Empowerment Hub (SNEH) and GiftAble ensure products made by the differently-abled find right buyers. They help bring orders, suggest innovative ideas that are sought-after in the market, play on the strength of each institution and even carry out trials on the products before launching them.

This is a big boost for these vocational units as Sumita says they neither have the resource nor the time to market the products. “L&T was the first corporate that supported our project and since then the support has come by word of mouth,” says Sumita.

LV Jayashree, director, SPASTN, says one drawback most institutions with vocational units faced was they were not market-oriented and were not in a position to create market.

“We work with SNEH and they drive product development for us, guiding us design a range of products targetting different segments of people for various occasions,” says Jayashree.

Financial empowerment

Jayashree says making them economically independent is an important step towards empowering the neuro-diverse individuals.

“We are looking at bringing a stipend component once pandemic improves and all our students are back to the campus, for which we will have to come out with a workable model so that one is compensated based on his/her input and production capacity,” says Jayashree.

V-Excel offer a small stipend to students involved in working at their units.

Anuradha Mahesh of SNEH, a not-for-profit that works to bring institutions for special needs together and create employment opportunities, says with market slowly opening up, there are plenty of opportunities that can be tapped.

“During the pandemic, we saw demand for items that employees need while working from home. Now, it is corporate gifting time and we need to leverage the goodness of the season,” says Anuradha.

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