

A business school, exclusively for rural women (FEATURE)

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Satara (Maharashtra), May 6 (IANS) Thirty-four-year old Lakshmi Kikade could never have dreamt of going to a business management school to learn the nuances of how to run a successful enterprise - for she had never received formal education.

But today she is a budding entrepreneur in her own right with a business management diploma, thanks to the grooming she received from Mann Deshi Udyogini - a business school for rural woman.

'I make and sell ladies bags in markets like Mumbai,' she says proudly.

What makes Mann Deshi Business School unique is that it is probably among those institutions that do not ask for any educational degree. All one needs to get admission is a burning entrepreneurial spirit coupled with an unquenchable thirst to make it big in life.

This business school was started by a non-governmental organisation called the Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank in collaboration with the Indian arm of HSBC, a leading global bank.

According to Mann Deshi trustees, it was the first rural bank to receive a cooperative license from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). It provides micro-credit to poor women in the Satara district of Maharashtra.

'Such training centres help to equip women in rural areas with requisite tools and nurse them to become efficient and successful entrepreneurs in their chosen fields,' Naina Lal Kidwai, country head for HSBC India, told IANS.

Unlike the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), this B-school has just three rooms where classes take place on shared basis and its fee structure starts from Rs.150 for the entire course that may go up to Rs.600.

The school offers a wide variety of courses on how to run enterprises in areas such as purse and bag making, photography, screen-printing and mobile telephony kiosks, apart from teaching women how to manage books of accounts and finance, the school's volunteers said.

When it started in December last year, almost 150 women enrolled themselves in various courses and in the next five years it plans to admit over 350 students per session, which lasts between three-six months.

'This is a path breaking institution as it recognises that women need relevant and appropriate training to enable them become good entrepreneurs, managers of their businesses and financial affairs,' said Malini Thadani, head of public affairs and corporate responsibility with HSBC India.

The B-school also offers counselling sessions every Friday, free of cost, for women who are not able to decide which course to pursue and which would be the potential area best suited for their aptitude.

Among its other services, it also offers a fully equipped gym where the women can attend exercise classes - also free of cost. Already, the school has opened four branches in Maharashtra and plans to spread out to Karnataka by tying up with the local non-government organisations there.

'This school has now become the lifeline for the poor rural women here. It has not only given them a better life but also a chance to stand up and take charge of their lives,' said Chetna Gala Sinha, founder of the institution.

'Initially when we started, we got a lukewarm response, but today it is teeming with students. We are now focusing on young girls, who, often due to family pressure, are married off without consent,' Sinha, a Yale alumna, said.

'Most of them want to work, and we want to give them the right platform to face the world,' said Sinha, adding that she was planning to organise a student exchange programme with the Universities of Yale and Michigan.

As a part of this programme, students from these Ivy League American colleges would hold classes for women and also to have a better understanding of rural India.