

**RUCHI YADAV**

SENIOR PROGRAM DIRECTOR, THE HUNGER PROJECT-INDIA

My name is Ruchi Yadav, I am from India, it's the longest plane ride I have ever taken in my life to be here! And I am so glad to be here. You know, it's really touched my heart that I am here with people who have been with The Hunger Project for 20 years, for 30 years... and here we are. I've just been with The Hunger Project for twelve years. I feel like a baby! So today, it's about really celebrating who we all are. And today, I want to share with you the story of a woman called Hansa. She's one of the bravest and most courageous women I've ever met. And there she is. She's 38 years of age, she's a public office holder, in a village council, in India. She was elected four years ago, when she was even younger; only 34. Before she became an elected representative, in a village council, she was a businesswoman. So how did she traverse the journey from a business woman to being a public office holder in a village council? That's where The Hunger Project weaves its magic. Women like Hansa are in public office in India because there is a revolutionary amendment in the constitution, which basically allows women to be in seats of decision-making. It's like your state assemblies; imagine if they had 50% women on them. Or imagine if all the corporate boards in America, and across the world, had 50% women on them. That world would be different, right? When this amendment was added to the constitution of India, at the time it was 33% women; now it's almost 50% women in most of the states we work in. The Hunger Project seized that opportunity, because they believed — we all believed — that women are capable. They're not stupid, they just need to be engaged with, they need to be invested in; they need to be made to think that they are capable of traveling immense possibilities.

In India, where I come from, it is one of the most dangerous spaces in the world for women. So when you work with women who have socially and culturally been told that their place is in the kitchen, how do you really empower them and change their mindset? That's where we work with the women on their courage, on self esteem, on building their confidence.... It's really a shift in the mindset, from "I cannot" to "I can". And then really, "we can". So working with women on this, and specifically working with Hansa, and the rest, as I tell you a story, is pretty remarkable. So once Hansa began coming to meetings by The Hunger Project, she kept on coming, she kept on learning, she kept on unlocking various barriers in her head. She realized that the place where she lived, which she loved, these mountains in India, the Himalayas, in northern India... it's a paradise. You can see the snow-capped mountains in the background, rolling hills; it's pristine. The air is fresh, you can actually hear the birds. Now that's

amazing! Where I come from in Delhi, you can't even see the sky, because it's really polluted. That's what most of our cities are moving towards. So this is a paradise which needs to be preserved, which needs to be protected, and which many people want for themselves. Hansa loves the forest. The huge pine trees out there, it's like a movie set! You only see these things David Attenborough's documentaries or in movie sets, and here you are walking through that.

And what happens then? You have the tourism mafia, you have the construction mafia, the people who want to cut the forest, cut the trees, steal the water, and that really makes Hansa angry. She said, "Why? Why would you do this? This is my residence, these are my people! How can you take this away from me?" Now here's where the real key is; Hansa is elected to a position where she has signatory powers to say no. And so she said no to these builders, to these construction mafia. Four years before she was elected, there were many permissions given to construct hotels, to build, to give away little properties to people. When she came on board, she decided not to sign those papers. And boy, was she bullied, she was threatened, the men in her family were approached with alcohol, with bribes, to make Hansa change her mind. Still, she said "No, I will not do it. I will stand with my people." That really requires a lot of courage, because you have really powerful lobbyists pushing you. But she said she had the power to say no, and she exercised that power. She was in a powerful decision-making position, and she used that.

But Hansa also realized that she cannot do it alone. She needs to take her people with her. Because how can any leader lead without having people with them? And that's what Hansa did, she had women in her village around her. She rallied them to her cause. And it was easy to rally them, because they were fighting for something very pure, and that is something very deep for them. It is something very important for them. They were not fighting for something else, far away. It was right there. So she rallied all of these women, around 200 of them. And they basically decided to revive the village forest councils so that they could fight a stronger battle against all these people who were trying to bully and threaten them. Hansa even got a death threat, because she refused to sign the papers, because she refused to listen to her family. How could the mafia get to her? They then started giving her death threats, and it just made her more determined. She said "What are they going to do, take away my life? Let them try it. I will not sign the papers. So it's really the two big messages are the power within, all that self esteem within, you bring it out to take on these people and to stand for what you believe in. It's the power within that's so important. The other thing is power with- get people with you. Get them to your cause, recruit them to your cause, and move together with them. These are two of the big pillars of The Hunger Project in India; the power within and the power "with". And with that we move, we engage, we stop the bullies, move the people, we make things happen.

And that's one Hansa. In India, we are working with 8,000 Hansa's, and there can be literally hundreds of thousands. One of the quotes that Hansa said when I was talking to her, she said "We have learned not to run away. We will keep standing." It's important for her because she is standing in the present, she is mindful about what is happening around her today. But she is also looking to the future. She knows if we let this pillage happen, the future is gone. There is no sustainability, there is no ecosystem to breathe, to survive. That's what Hansa is working to prevent, and that's what 8,000 women like Hansa in India are doing, fighting for water, for dignity, against child marriage, for education, for healthcare, against hunger and

poverty. And what is the number of people they are impacting? Make a mental note, count the zeros: 6.4 million people. 6.4 million people are being impacted by these 8,000 powerful leaders. And I thank all of you for being with us for so many years, standing with us, standing behind us... it's the power of "with". You all make it happen, so thank you from the people all around the world who benefit from The Hunger Project, and especially from India. Namaste.

### **MACKENZIE NKALAPA,**

**DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS - THE HUNGER PROJECT-MALAWI**

I've traveled all the way from Malawi, Southern Africa, to share a story with you. When I think of courage and connection, I think of Victor Kudzawe. Victor is a 44 year old man from the village of Huwa – a village of 382 people in the Central part of Malawi. His village is one of 28 villages where the Hunger Project works in the region. Victor was born in Huwa and has lived there all of his life. When The Hunger Project first came to this region -- empowering the people to end their own hunger and poverty. The people were so moved that they immediately went to work on their top priority: education. Together, they built a nursery school for children ages 3 to 5 years old. When Victor learned of the school, he was so inspired. As a father of 5, he could see that a school was essential to the new future he wanted for the people of his village; even though 4 of Victor's children were too old to attend the school. But the problem was that Victor's village was too far from the new school – over two miles each way. It was too far for the little ones to walk – in the dust and the heat. Victor could not stand it that the children of his village were being left out. So, because Victor had been part of The Hunger Project's Vision Commitment and Action workshop -- he had been connected to his own vision, to the power of his commitment, and key skills. Skills like leadership, networking, planning, and moving other human beings to take action. Victor found the courage to reach out and connect with all the parents in his village. Victor shared his vision for the village to have its own school. And together the village constructed a schoolroom -- with a grass ceiling, grass walls, and a dirt floor. Together, they found two volunteers to be school teachers. It was an amazing first step -- but there were challenges.

During the rainy season, the school would not hold up. And in the dry season, the school was too dusty, the children ended up with coughs and it was tough to keep them clean! But still Victor did not give up. He reconnected to his training with The Hunger Project; he started networking; he found a local volunteer. He shared his vision for a school for the children of Huwa. The volunteer advised Victor to write a grant proposal! Victor had never done ANYTHING like this before. But, he turned to his Hunger Project training -- and he found the courage to learn -- And he dared to figure it out! He wrote the proposal in his local vernacular, then had it translated into English. And Victor won the grant for his tiny village of Huwa!

Equipped with iron sheets, cement, poles, wire nails, paints and doors. Victor gathered the people of his village once again and together they constructed a sturdy two room schoolhouse. And on the first day, 25 children attended the new school -- including victor's youngest son. Today, 70 children -- 24 boys and 46 girls -- now have access to early childhood education due to the courage of one man: Victor Kudzawe. Victor is now a happy man. His village now has a school. But, he didn't stop there. Today, he's an elected official -- continuing

to improve the lives of his people. And I want you to know: across all of The Hunger Project in the last 5 years -- our village partners like Victor around the globe have enrolled over 46,000 children in school. Thank you.

### **SYLVIA HERNÁNDEZ MORTERA**

#### **PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT FOR THE HUNGER PROJECT-MEXICO**

If you were to ask an indigenous woman in Mexico her opinion about her household or her village, she would likely say, “I don’t know about that. My husband would know. My brother would know. You should talk to them. They are the ones making decisions. I’m just a woman” This is what the persistence of hunger sounds like, because it’s not just about food...it’s about mindsets. When The Hunger Project works with women, to create new possibilities for their lives. You might hear the women ask questions like, “When you talk about human rights -- you mean us? You mean our daily lives? We have a right to speak? We have a right to participate and make decisions?” Something transformational happens when women realize they count and start making use of their voices.

One of the women asking such questions in a Hunger Project workshop in Oaxaca was Paty Martinez. She is a 30-year-old woman of a 10-year-old child. Paty is a very bright woman and a transformative leader. When I think of her, I think of her smile – I love seeing her smile and laugh. I think about her commitment to transforming the life of the community, her family and herself. Also, I think of how powerful she is when she is speaking her mind in public – in spaces that are traditionally only for men. She may show up to a meeting in her own village To speak before men she has known all her life – who may have certain opinions about her. Or, she may walk for hours through the forest—traveling to a neighboring community to speak to a gathering of strangers -- men she has never met. Paty’s work with The Hunger Project has confirmed that her knowledge, experiences and input as a woman are important. But when she actually stands in front of groups of men, it’s still hard. She carries a fear. She can remember men telling her “what you are saying – it’s not relevant. Sit down” She can remember when the men just didn’t listen at all.

But here is what I want you to know about Paty: She feels this fear -- and she does not stop. With The Hunger Project’s training – the Vision, Commitment and Action workshop – Paty and the people of her village of Cerro Alto in Oaxaca looked closely at what they wanted for their children, their village. They discovered that they had a vision for a self-reliant future. With this vision, they committed to taking action. Together. Together, meaning both women and men having a say in the planning and participating in the action. Together, meaning advocating with and partnering with their local government. They envisioned all of this and, at the very top of their list was clean, safe water. Because water is a human right.

You see, in Cerro Alto, Paty and the people of her village -- most often the women and children -- would walk far from their doorsteps to climb down into caves to collect water from underground rivers – in the dark. They would carry pails full of water to the surface – and carry them home. The community had lost people to these underground rivers. The water sometimes made the children sick. The task took hours every day. Paty and the people of her village

wanted to have clean, fresh water – close to home – and not collected from dangerous underground rivers, but instead – collected straight from the sky.

The Hunger Project found a technical partner -- water experts -- to assist Paty and her village to make this happen. They described that they wanted to catch water from the sky, and the water experts said: "We have the answer! A concrete system for collecting rainwater which they could bring in on trucks." The villagers considered this solution, and because Paty and her village now knew the sound and power of their own voices, because they knew the particulars of their everyday lives actually mattered, they said, "no." They said, "We want something that is moveable. We want something that can be taken apart and carried. We want to take these rainwater catchment systems to every village in our region -- so that all our people can have water." What happened next is something that is essential to dignity, to human rights; essential to the end of hunger. There was a dialogue between equals, led by Paty -- the women, the men and the water experts working together. That back and forth – between true partners – produced an innovation that fully respects their indigenous vision and value for nature. A new system for catching water that can be packed up and carried– whose installation does not disturb the forest. Paty and the women of Cerro Alto have led a process -- together they have learned how to install, maintain and fix the systems. Paty, along with other women and men from Cerro Alto have gone to other regions of Mexico and have trained other communities to do the same.

There are now 120 rainwater catchment systems across the 3 regions of Mexico, and the number keeps growing. Across all of The Hunger Project's work -- in 12 countries -- over the last 5 years -- the people themselves have installed 3,000 clean water systems and wells. And Paty, she keeps speaking, emphasizing the importance of women being part of decision-making process directly, with fewer intermediaries and more opportunities for direct dialogues between rural communities and governments at all levels. Most recently, Paty traveled 2 hours through the forest, 4 hours on backroads, 10 hours on highways – all the way to Mexico City. All the many hours she worried, "I'm so nervous. What if I say something stupid? Who is going to listen to an indigenous women?" But again, she did it. She stood and addressed a room full of ambassadors, governors and ministers from the European Union. Their response? "We need to hear more from women like you."