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Women at the bottom of the ladder

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The Hindu TOUGH WORK, HARD LUCK: Women rarely go up the ladder in the construction sector except for carrying heavy headloads. File photo: K. Ananthan

Women enter and exit work site as labourers irrespective of the number of years they worked there.

Feminism and female education have shaken many a male bastion and sometimes even blown up its existence. A lady doctor is now a norm rather than an oddity and teachers are predominantly women. Even in the unskilled sector, women manage small businesses, run shops and organise their livelihoods. Though the world may soon unwrap the first

Architect Barbie, on the field in construction and architecture, it is still men who lay the keystone. While analysts scratch their heads over how only 20 per cent of the women end up practising architecture, the scene at the work site is even worse.

For years women have worked as labourers. Unlike men who come in as small boys, assist the mason for some years as helpers and finally, when the time comes, graduate as masons. Later, some of these masons become contractors and move up the social ladder. However, this order of informal training is reserved only for men. Women enter and exit the site as labourers irrespective of the number of years they worked there.

I asked a group of masons casually over tea why women never became masons and their answers were varied. Most believe that women fear heights, hence are unable to climb difficult scaffoldings. This seems absurd when you see the same women going to the highest points of the scaffolding to pass mortar and blocks. Others believe that it is physically demanding work to be a mason. Women seem to be giving of their best, carrying heavy loads on their heads, sometimes, with a small child tied on their backs.

Interviewing women at the site reveals another line of reasons. Most families do not prefer young unmarried girls going to the site both because it is a male dominated environment and also because the work is physically strenuous. Earlier on in life they prefer girls doing housework. Later, if forced by necessity, they take up the job at site. By then it is considered too late for specialised training so women begin and end their careers as labourers.

Many pluses

Supervisors often praise women for better job quality, sincerity and discipline. They are more regular, do not drink alcohol or create trouble and they contribute their salaries for the betterment of the family. However, they are held back from better work by tradition and unwritten job hierarchies.

Paid less for same work

These differences become starker on the salary day. A woman receives much less than a man for the same nature of work (Rs. 165 for women

and Rs. 306 for men a day is the current standard at most sites in Tamil Nadu). If you begin to argue, the replies stand ready. Women labourers have softer duties than men. This does not seem true when you observe them on the long line that passes bricks from one end to the other, shoulder to shoulder under the scorching sun with their male counterparts.

Since women constitute a major portion of the workforce and their skill development will play a crucial role in the years to come as construction projects boom all over the country, there have been numerous attempts by the government as well as NGOs to train and promote women masons. Although the training goes well and women take up the skills, it is when the time comes to find a job that the scheme fails. The social taboos surrounding a woman mason overpower her from being active in the mainstream. Contractors are reluctant to accept women and women are reluctant to step into a men-only domain.

Post-tsunami in Tamil Nadu, the government funded many projects to train women masons so that they become agents of reconstruction. One such project was run at the Auroville Institute of Technology. It involved three months of theory classes followed by three months of on-site experience. We received six coy young girls. After initial hesitation, they settled down well. The masons were more than helpful and taught them well. They actively participated in all aspects of construction. After three months, their skills were commendable. Asked what their future plans were, none of them wanted to be a mason at site. They said the training was fine; however their families did not appreciate their working side by side with men. Some intended to use this experience and study further, maybe learn drafting on CAD and settle in a comfortable job. Others had plans of going to the Middle East (where some family member was already working) and try to get some construction work there.

Though it might be a while before we see women skilfully laying blocks, bending steel or plastering walls, the winds of change have begun to blow. Women have proved that it is not skill that they lack but opportunities. If we strive for better, safer and more equitable sites for them to step forward, I am sure they will not disappoint us.

References

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