

Jobs and Skilling Landscape for Women Construction Workers in India

Learning from Case Studies

AN ACTION-RESEARCH PROJECT LED BY



Sehreeti Developmental
Practices Foundation





Authors:

Kirtee Shah, President, INHAF

Nidhi Batra, Founder and Director, Sehreeti Developmental Practices Foundation

Sneha Varghese, Research Associate, INHAF

Ujjvala Krishna, Research Associate, INHAF

Cover & Design:

Sneha Varghese, Ujjvala Krishna

Published by:

Habitat Forum INHAF,

403, P.D. Apartments, Pritamnagar, 10, Paldi,

Ellisbridge, Ahmedabad 380006

Sehreeti Developmental Practices Foundation

J-6/1, DLF Phase 2, Gurgaon, Haryana 122002

Website: www.inhaf.org; www.sehreeti.org

Email: kirtee@inhaf.org; sehreeti@gmail.com

November 2022

Copyright: Free to use any part of this document for non-commercial purpose, with acknowledgment of source. For Private Circulation Only

Table of Contents

Foreword	5
Introduction	6
The Problem and Its Urgency	
About the Initiative	
Case Studies	8
A. Kudumbashree Women’s Masons Training Program	9
About	
Genesis and Development	
Theory of Change	
Challenges	
Lessons Learnt	
B. JEEWOMS Womens Masons Society	18
About	
Genesis and Development	
Theory of Change	
Challenges	
Lessons Learnt	
C. Karmika School of Construction Workers	27
About	
Genesis and Development	
Theory of Change	
Challenges	
Lessons Learnt	
D. Habitat for Humanity Project Nirmanshree	38
About	
Genesis and Development	
Theory of Change	
Challenges	
Lessons Learnt	
Comparing Case Studies	47
Challenges and Recommendations	48
Challenge I:	
Despite the increase in the number/ types of training avenues available to women construction workers in the skill development sector, they are denied jobs and do not receive equal pay. Skilling alone cannot guarantee better jobs and income.	
<i>Recommendation: Reserve a Percentage of the Skilled Jobs in the Public Sector Construction Projects for Women</i>	49

Challenge II:

Lack of sustainability of women-led micro-enterprises due to lack of working capital, lack of access to machinery, insufficient training in project management, and opaque business practices.

Recommendation: Build a Support Ecosystem for Women-Led Micro-Enterprises in the Construction Industry 51

Challenge III:

Mechanisation and automation of the construction industry will make manual labour intensive jobs, employing mainly women, obsolete.

Recommendation: Shifting Focus to Higher Skilled and Higher Productivity Jobs in the Construction Industry 53

Challenge IV:

labour laws in the country have been built around the assumption of a ‘standard employment relationship’, and are built around a gendered conception of labour.

Recommendation: Integrating Skill Development with Assertion of Labour and Women’s Rights 55

Challenge V:

There is a lack of industry involvement in the skill development sector, especially that of women construction workers, due to the fragmented and dynamic nature of the industry.

Recommendation: Securing Buy-In of Private Sector Stakeholders Towards Promoting Gender Equality In Construction Industry 57

Challenge VI:

Vocational and technical education system have been ineffective in supplying skilled workers to the construction industry, compounded with the minimal participation of women in such training systems.

Recommendation: Reforming Vocational and Technical Education System to Enhance Women’s Participation in Skilled Construction Sector 59

Challenge VII:

The larger socio-economic and cultural standing of women in society, especially with the intersection of vulnerabilities, makes access to skill development an even harder challenge.

Recommendation: Triggering Impact at Scale Through Convergence with Central and State Level Infrastructure and Community Development Programs 61

Challenges and Recommendations Summary 63

Conclusion 65

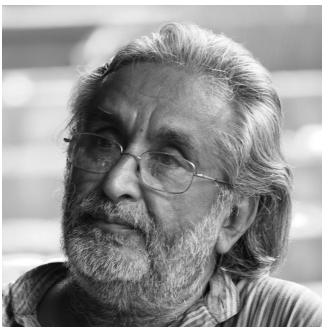
Foreword

On construction sites, few women are seen engaged in skilled work like masonry, carpentry, plumbing, etc. The construction industry in itself has displayed tremendous change in terms of technology and scale over the years. And yet, the position of women in the industry has remained unchanged and tied to unskilled, manual labour intensive, low-paying, and low-dignity jobs.

Our two partner organisations, Habitat Forum (INHAF) and Sehreeti Developmental Practices Foundation came together with the objective to understand and address this issue. Our interactions with various stakeholders in the construction industry including builders, developers, training institution leaders, trade union representatives and civil society revealed that while there is acknowledgement of the deplorable conditions of women construction workers there has limited action taken in this regard. Only a small group of civil society organisations have spearheaded initiatives that skill women construction workers. The need of the hour is an ecosystem approach that brings in the participation of major stakeholders in the construction industry and skilling ecosystem to ensure that women construction workers are not just skilled but are also able to access skilled jobs.

This study presents the preliminary recommendations we have arrived at to transform this situation along with insights from our discussions with various stakeholders. We intend for it to be a call for collaboration with organisations working in the space of skilling, habitat development, and gender equity to integrate efforts towards mainstreaming skilled women construction workers.

Project Team



Kirtee Shah
PRESIDENT,
HABITAT FORUM, INHAF



Nidhi Batra
FOUNDER,
SEHREETI DEVELOPMENTAL
PRACTICES FOUNDATION



Sneha Maria Varghese
RESEARCH ASSOCIATE,
HABITAT FORUM, INHAF



Ujjvala Krishna
RESEARCH ASSOCIATE,
HABITAT FORUM, INHAF

Introduction



Fig 1: Source: Left to Right: Alamy; Retrieved from <https://c8.alamy.com/comp/DPEBJ7/young-women-construction-workers-stand-with-their-small-children-in-DPEBJ7.jpg>; DepositPhotos; Retrieved from https://static9.depositphotos.com/1493050/1121/ii/950/depositphotos_11212450-stock-photo-female-construction-worker-india.jpg; The Wire; Retrieved from https://mcmcache.epapr.in/post_images/website_350/post_15665046/thumb

The Problem and Its Urgency

The construction industry has been described as a ‘shock absorber’, providing easy entry to populations affected by rural livelihood crises. Contributing to 9% of the country’s GDP and employing 51 million people, it is the second largest employer after agriculture. The recent decades have seen an influx of women, especially of those from historically marginalized communities into the industry’s workforce. As per NSS (2011-12) women constitute around 30% of the industry’s workforce. While the low entry barriers of the industry facilitated labour force participation for a large number of women, these jobs are accompanied by income insecurity, violation of rights, and poor working conditions. Within construction sites, women are hardly ever seen performing skilled jobs and are confined to jobs marked by low wages, low stability, low productivity, and low upward mobility.

About the Initiative

Habitat Forum (INHAF) and Sehreeti Developmental Practices Foundation are organisations that have been working in the milieu of inclusive urban habitat, urban informality, and poverty. This collaborative action program builds further on that narrative. We aim to arrive at strategic recommendations for mainstreaming women construction workers in skilled jobs.

While there are various programs, initiatives and pilots towards improving conditions of workers it is our contention that these interventions need to ‘collaborate’, ‘learn from each other’, ‘scale-up impact’ and ‘address systemic challenges’. The conditions of living and the marginalization of women workers has been insufficiently addressed till now. The industry and workers themselves are the key to ‘co-creating’ solutions with experts, civil society and academia in discussion with the policy and regulatory environment. A holistic approach is required to study, influence, advocate and inform various interventions that are already in place or in conception across the policy environment. The action program will inquire and address ‘what can each stakeholder and at each step of construction value chain’ can do to mainstream women in skilled jobs.

Objectives

- Identifying and assessing the reasons behind gender disparities and discrimination in access to skilled jobs in construction sector by women workers.
- Capturing positive initiatives and pilots taken in India to mainstream women workers in skilled jobs.
- Leveraging upon these case studies to arrive at strategic multistakeholder recommendations towards strengthening the participation of women in skilled jobs in the construction sector.
- Initiating dialogue and advocacy action directed towards government, industry, industry associations and chambers, architects, builders, skilling institutions (govt./pvt), workers association, civil society, donors and informal social system for enhancing access to skilled jobs to women construction workers.

In pursuance of these objectives, this report brings together the experiences of four organisations who have pioneered initiatives for the skill development of women construction workers. In addition to shedding light on the strategies through which gender barriers in the construction industry were confronted, it also seeks to identify the challenges and the lessons learnt for scaling up such problems. Further, through a multi-stakeholder workshop that brings together the experiential knowledge of the four organisations we aim to arrive at disruptive yet practical recommendations for improving access to skilled jobs for women construction workers. The 4 organisations studied through this initiative are:

KUDUMBASHREE

State Poverty Eradication Mission, Govt. of Kerala



ARCHANA WOMEN'S CENTRE

Established and Managed by Jyothi Jeeva Poorna Trust



MAHILA HOUSING SEWA TRUST

Dignified Home, Dignified Work, Dignified Life



Habitat for Humanity India

Through Shelter We Empower



Case Studies





Kudumbashree Women's Masons Training Program



KUDUMBASHREE

State Poverty Eradication Mission, Govt. of Kerala

About

Set up in 1997, Kudumbashree is the poverty eradication and women empowerment programme implemented by the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM) of the Government of Kerala. It is essentially a community network with a three tier structure - Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) as primary level units, Area Development Societies (ADS) at the ward level, and Community Development Societies (CDS) at the local government level. By 15th September 2021 had 2,94,436 NHGs affiliated to 19,489 ADSs and 1064 CDSs with a total membership of 45,85,677 women and is arguably one of the largest women's networks in the world. Its three main project domains are economic empowerment, social empowerment.¹

Genesis and Development

The Kudumbashree Constructions Program was started in 2014 with support from HUDCO CSR funds. The program was initiated with two objectives in mind.² Firstly, to increase the participation of women in the manual labour workforce of Kerala, thereby promoting gender equality and economic empowerment. Secondly, to contribute to the growth of the state by supplying skilled labour through trained women for the various infrastructure development programs. An initial cohort of 200 women were selected from Ernakulam district and given a 53 day training which included both off site and on elements. Among the pilot cohort 8 women came together to form a micro-enterprise unit called 'Kudumbashree Constructions' which received a work order for construction of 70 houses from the state's Scheduled Tribes Development Department. This marked the start of a state-wide women masons training program that converged with the state's rural and urban development policies and projects.³

1. <https://www.kudumbashree.org/pages/171>

2. <https://hudco.org.in/writereaddata/EB/HUDCO-BPA/files/basic-html/page59.html>



Fig 2: Kudumbashree Constructions Program

The training program began to be expanded to other districts with the goal being to create at least one all-women construction unit for each local self-government body. In 2016, Kerala government announced its affordable housing scheme LIFE Mission which aimed to provide housing for 4.3 lakh homeless households in five years. This created a demand for skilled construction labour which provided an impetus to the program. To date a total of 2652 Kudumbashree members have undertaken training in 14 districts. From these trainees, 288 construction groups have been formed with each group having 5-10 members each. These groups have undertaken 316 house construction projects under various schemes such as LIFE Mission, PMAY-Urban and Tribal Rehabilitation Mission in addition to MGNREGA work.⁴

Among the various districts, Alappuzha has been one of the front runners with 48 construction groups set up (46 rural groups and 2 urban groups) that have undertaken the construction of 145 houses. The training program was started in 2017 to supply skilled labour for the PK Kalan Scheduled Tribe Housing Scheme which was being implemented by the Scheduled Tribe Development Department. It received its impetus in 2018 through the Ramoji CSR House Construction Project which provided 116 houses for flood wrecked victims in the district. Based on recommendation from the government, the execution of this project was contracted to Kudumbashree women construction groups. Even while facing detrimental impacts of the flood themselves these groups were able to build 121 houses with the budget allotted for 116 houses. Having gained experience and visibility through these projects many of these groups have gone

3. Shajumon, S. (2018). An Impact Study of Kudumbashree Construction Groups. UNPSA.

4. <https://www.kudumbashree.org/pages/217>

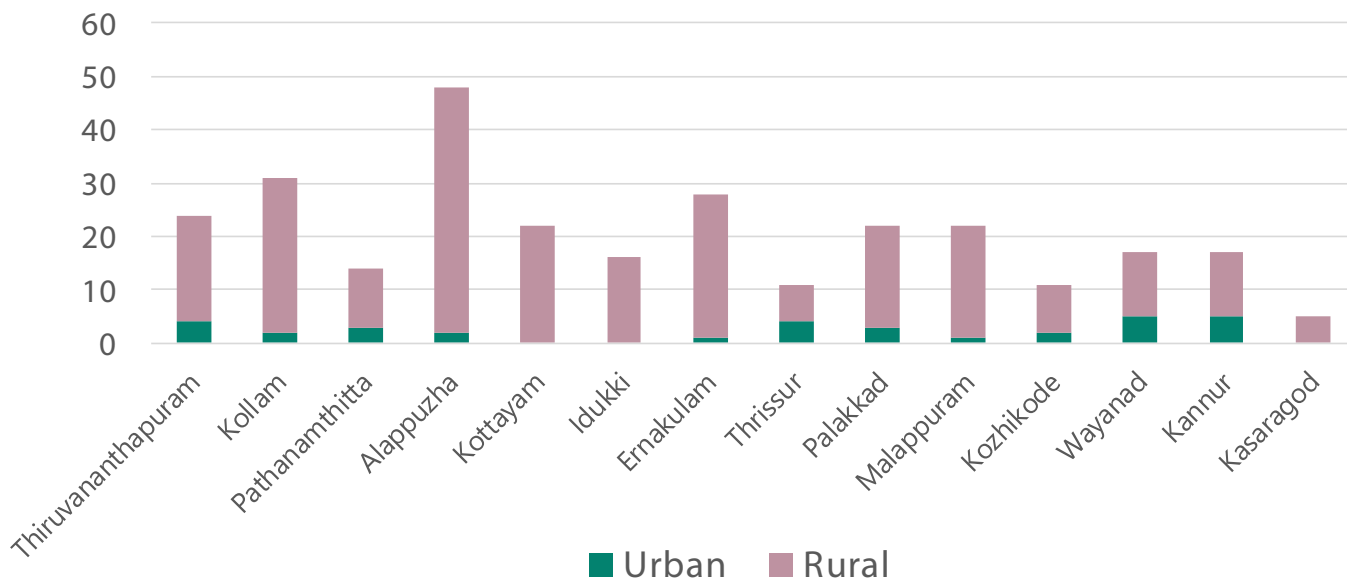


Fig 3: Number of Kudumbashree Construction Units created District-wise ⁵

on to secure work orders from their Panchayats for small-scale infrastructure projects.⁶ The 48 construction units in the district have undertaken a total of 145 house construction projects and have generated a total revenue of 3.2 Crore to date.⁷

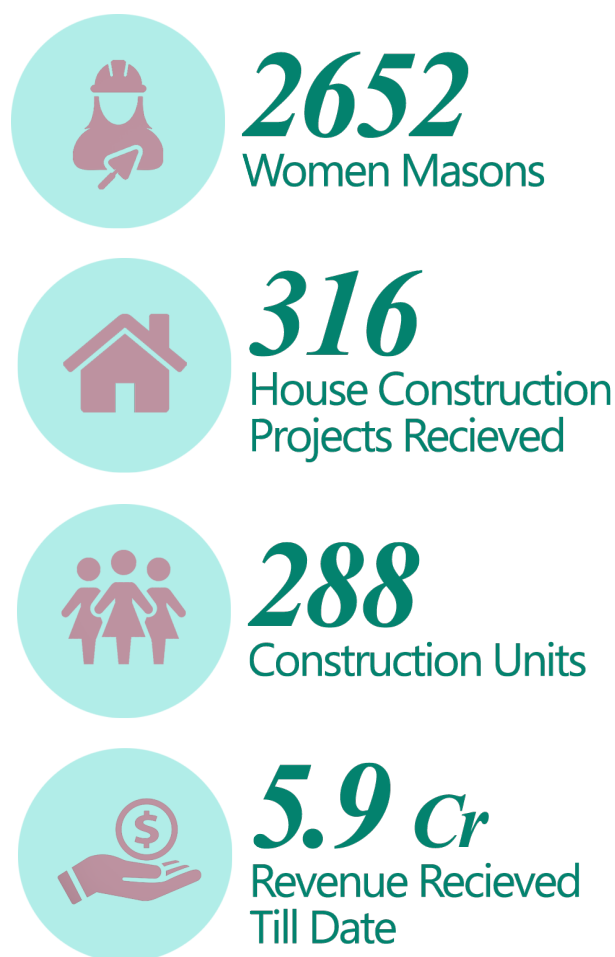


Fig 4: Program Impact ⁸

5. <https://kudumbashree.org/pages/598>

6. Interview with representative of Kudumabashree Alappuzha District Mission

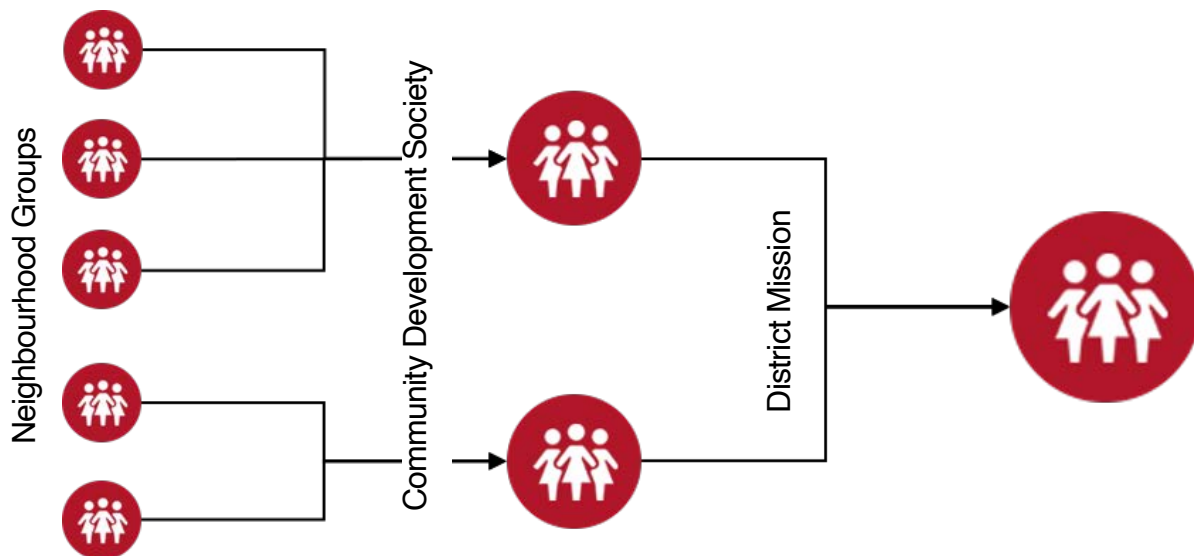
7. <https://kudumbashree.org/pages/598>

8. Ibid

Theory of Change

1

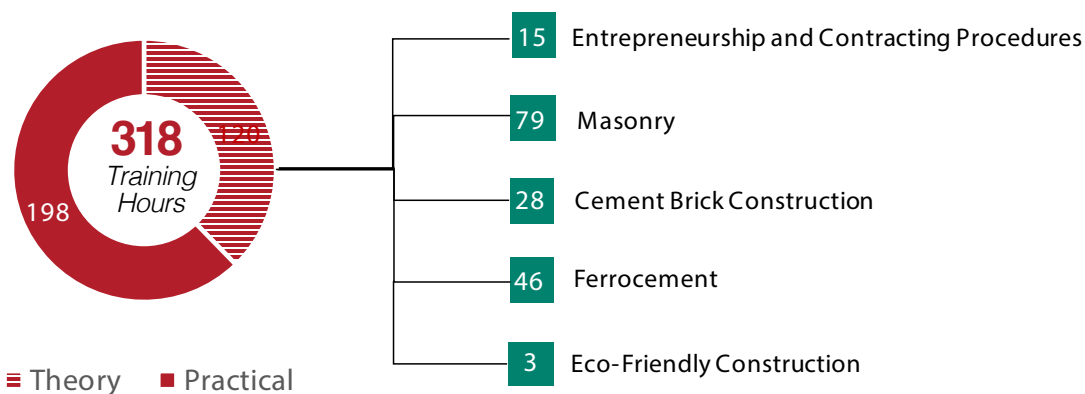
Recruitment through Kudumbashree's Network



The Kudumbashree Mission functions as a three-tier structure: the Neighborhood Groups at the grassroots level with 15 to 40 members, the Area Development Society formed at the ward level which federates 8-10 NHGs, and the Community Development Society formed at the panchayat level that works with the Local Self government bodies.⁹ Women for the masons training program are recruited through this network. In Alappuzha it was seen that most of the women who participate in the program are unemployed women whose primary income source is through MGNREGA work. Considering the limited number of work days (100-150) and meagre wages of Rs 274 per day, the motivation for most of the women who participate is to obtain a more sustainable employment opportunity. Further, by becoming skilled workers the women would be able to earn higher wages under the MGNREGA scheme.¹⁰ The training program is

2

Three Phase Training Program



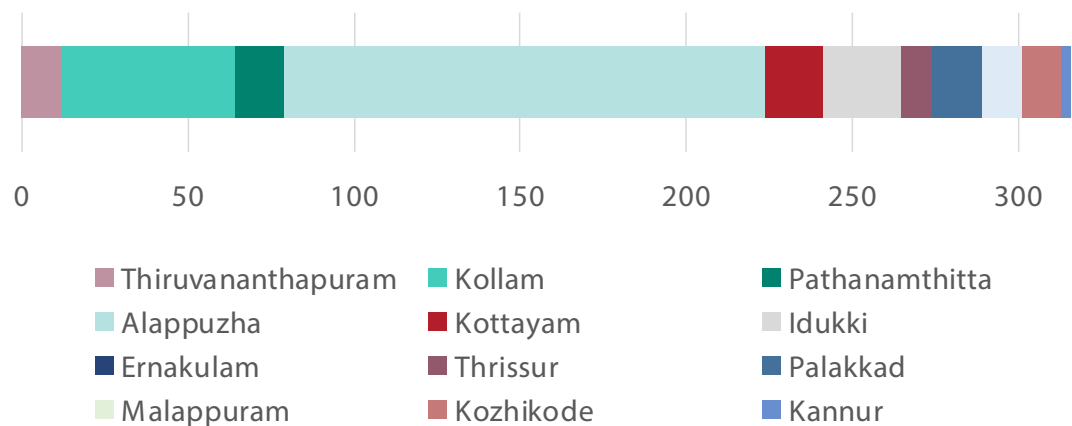
9. <https://www.kudumbashree.org/pages/171>

10. Interview with representative of Kudumabashree Alappuzha District Mission

conducted as a 54-day program organized into three-phases. The first phase is General Orientation which includes classes such as Motivation and Leadership Training, the second phase is Construction Theory which covers aspects of foundation, filling, concreting, brickwork, lintel work, plastering, and the third phase is Practical training in which the cohort is deployed in groups to undertake various house construction works under the supervision of trainers. The training is by certain empaneled agencies such as COSTFORD, Nirmita Kendra and Archana Women's Centre. In the recent years, individual masons are also relied upon to impart training and they are paid a wage rate of Rs 125 for every hour. The participating women are also paid a stipend of Rs 50 per hour, with their wages increasing to the normal market rate once they are placed on house construction projects.¹¹

3

Micro-enterprise Building and Convergence with PRIs



One of the key strengths of the Kudumbashree Mission is its convergence with the Panchayati Raj Institutions which allows for women-led inclusive community development. For the women masons training program too, the convergence with PRIs are utilized to ensure that training translates into job placement and women empowerment. After completing their training, construction groups of 5 - 10 members are formed at the Panchayat or CDS level. These groups register themselves with local self-government bodies. The government of Kerala has issued multiple directives to LSGs mandating that for projects below 10 lakh, Kudumbashree's construction units should be given preference while awarding work orders. The Kudumbashree District Missions actively work lobby with various government departments and Panchayats to secure projects for the construction units. In these projects Kudumbashree acquires material and equipment for the groups and also provide site supervision.¹²

11. Shajumon, S. (2018). An Impact Study of Kudumbashree Construction Groups. UNPSA.

12. Interview with representative of Kudumabashree Alappuzha District Mission

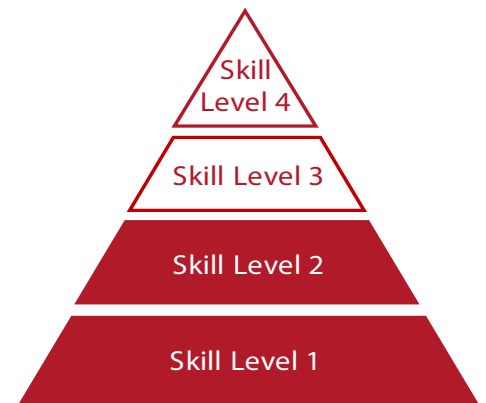
13. <https://kudumbashree.org/pages/598>

Challenges

1

Skill Gap that Remains

While Kudumbashree's training model is geared towards creating all-women construction teams, on ground it is found that the groups are not completely self-sufficient. Certain key aspects of house construction work such as concreting the roof are outsourced because this is labourious work and the women construction groups do not have easy access to machines that would make it easier.



Similarly, while introduced to electric work and plumbing the women have not been imparted in-depth training in these areas. Time constraint set for government contracts is another reason why these construction groups of 5-10 have to rely on outside help to complete the projects assigned. Further, the influence of local trade unions is also a factor that results in other workers being employed along with the women masons. Men employed on the project are comparatively paid much higher than the women workers.¹⁴

2

Reliance on District Mission Authorities

In Alappuzha it was found that drop out rates are minimal during the training, but they increase after the groups have been formed. The groups rely heavily on the Kudumbashree district level authorities to find projects. Ideally the units themselves are to work with their Panchayat representatives to find out about projects in their area and secure work order. However, this kind of initiative is minimally seen. Some groups are also seen to break up due to internal and financial issues.¹⁵

The Ambalappuzha panchayat construction team is a best example of self-reliance and initiative. Supported by their CDS president, who held strong influence with the Panchayat's elected members, this group was able to secure the project for the boundary wall construction of the government school in their village.

14. Interview with Women Construction Unit in Ambalappuzha Panchayat

15. Interview with representative of Kudumabashree Alappuzha District Mission

Ambalappuzha Construction Unit



When people see us they look with wonder. They have seen women as helpers on site but not as masons.

The team got their training in 2017 when the CDS had called out for women who were interested in getting construction work. They had no prior construction experience before this. One of the women jokingly said, 'even for my own house I had not lifted a stone and kept.' During training, they got exposure to all aspects of building a home including wiring, plumbing, and painting. Through on-the-job training they undertook the construction of a LIFE Mission house. It was testament to their determination that they went to complete the concreting of that house while they were staying in relief camps following the 2018 floods. After training they registered their team of 5 members at CDS.

Since then they did 3 complete houses under the Ramoji CSR Housing project. The women proudly said that, 'whenever we walk by those houses we feel good knowing that our hands were involved in making them.' They were paid 500 Rs per day from Kudumbashree District Mission for these projects. One of the women said that she had been able to pay her daughters 2 lakh hostel fees from the earnings of these 3 projects.

'It is good money, but it is also hard work', said one of the women. They are keen on taking on more projects as a group. The women do not have much interest in taking on construction work individually. They know that in other sites women only have the position of helper. They are more interested in working as a group. One of the women said, 'When people look at us they look with wonder. They might have seen women working as helpers in construction sites, but this is the first time they have seen women as a mason holding a karandi.' They see their work as an act of social service. One of the women said, 'Because we got into this work, three poor people have a house now. That is our biggest fulfillment.'

Need for Working Capital

One of the major challenges that stands in the way of the groups achieving self-reliance is the lack of working capital. The Alappuzha assistant district mission coordinator gave the example of a construction unit in Malappuram district whom he had mentored as an example. The group took up a road maintenance project under the MGNREGA scheme. They were advised to focus less on profit and more on taking on a project of volume so that they could match the pre-qualification criteria for future tenders. But for each aspect of the work such as acquiring material, paying external skilled workers, they had to pay from their own pocket. The team had to spend 25 lakh which exhausted their resources. Moreover, they were able to recover the amount they spent only after 180 - 200 days which is the time it takes for MGNREGA payments to be disbursed. The general understanding is that the groups will have to have at 10 lakhs as rolling funds in order to take up local infrastructure projects under MGNREGA. Kudumbashree has the provision for extending loans to micro-enterprises from its Community Enterprise Fund but they can only give a maximum of 1.5 lakh.¹⁶

Need for Machinery

Associated with the need for working capital is the need for machinery which impedes the women groups from taking up projects on their own. In Kudumbashree initiated projects while the groups are supplied with required machinery, when they take up their own projects they have to rent the machinery. The Alappuzha assistant district mission coordinator shared that a potential project area that women construction groups can be strategically mainstreamed in is road maintenance and beatification projects which will involve cleaning pavements, removing slabs, lifting broken trees etc. These projects will have continuous demand and can generate higher profit margins. However, to take them up, the women will need access to machinery and training to handle it, through models such as a machinery bank. The Ambalappuzha panchayat construction team seconded this idea, sharing that it makes fiscal sense for them to rent rather than buy the machinery.¹⁷

Insufficient implementation of the directives to LSGs

While government orders mandating that LSGs give preference to their construction units while awarding projects below 10 lakhs, these orders are insufficiently implemented. In addition to the misconceptions about capability of the women workers, this is due to the nexus between contractors and elected representatives. The women construction groups often find it hard to bid for projects because they lack the necessary capital. One way to mitigate this would be to aggregate the groups in various panchayats. However, an initiative like this will require political will especially at the Block level which is currently lacking.¹⁸

16 and 17. Interview with representative of Kudumbashree Alappuzha District Mission

18. Ibid

1

Mainstreaming Versus Self-Employment Generation



The emphasis on women-led construction enterprise building allows circumventing the barriers associating with job placement for women workers in mainstream construction work. However, this can address the employment needs of only a small group of women workers. It is necessary to integrate job placement measures along with entrepreneurship building.

2

Support for Women-Led Micro enterprises



An ecosystem of support has to be mobilized for micro-enterprise building from acquiring work orders, to accessing credit schemes, to supplying materials and equipment. Convergence with existing government schemes such as MUDRA Loan scheme or Women Entrepreneurship Platform should be promoted.

3

Convergence with Panchayati Raj Institutions



Kudumbashree's convergence with Panchayati Raj Institutions is a key strength of the program that allows for direct job placement. This can be further leveraged upon to push for placement of women workers in CSR projects as a pathway to making inroads into private sector.



JEEWOMS Women Masons Society



ARCHANA WOMEN'S CENTRE

Established and Managed by **Jyothi Jeeva Poorna Trust**

About

Archana Women's Centre is the Kerala wing of Jyothi Jeeva Poorna Trust (JJPT) run by the Secular Institute – The Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate. The centre was started under the leadership of Miss Thresiamma Mathew [OMMI] in the year 2004, in Kottayam District of Kerala. Propelled by its mission, “fullness of life for all”, Archana Women's Centre (AWC) is dedicated to empowering women through a conscious effort through its interventions. AWC is committed to promote physical, mental, psychological and spiritual empowerment of women through intellectual awareness and devolution of skills. The mission of the organisation is to work towards women's empowerment, leading to socio economic equality and harmony in occupational vicissitudes.¹⁹

Genesis and Development

The genesis of the Archana Women's Center – women mason programme traces back to 1988 when the Socio-Economic Units Kerala(SEU) which was launched as part of a Dutch - Danish government funded water and sanitation project in Kerala. While serving as Director of the Gender and Development vertical of the Socio-Economic Unit, Thresiamma Mathew noticed the deplorable condition of women workers involved in the project. Women were only allowed to do the labour-intensive work such as carry stones or mix cement, and were denied the opportunity to take up the trowel and do the work of a mason. Besides, the women were given only half the wages of a male helper doing the same job. It was another reason that prompted her to ask the question, ‘why can't women become masons?’

19. Thomas, A. and Joseph, A. (2016). Enchanting Lives: The Archana Model Women Empowerment. Rajagiri Journal of Social Development, 8(2).

At first her question was met with laughter and ridicule not only by male workers but also by the women themselves. They expressed their concerns about societal pressures saying that, 'How can we become masons with just two months of training when men train for years under their master?'; 'Will others accept us?'; 'Will we lose our jobs as helpers?'. It was only after a lot of counseling that Ms. Mathew was able to find a batch of 12 motivated women workers who wanted to obtain the mason training. The next step was finding male trainers, which once again turned out to be a difficult task. She was able to get the buy-in of an engineer in SEUF with whose help she conducted the first training session.²⁰

The training was tailored towards employing the women on water and sanitation projects and included practical skills of bricklaying, level-checking, plastering, floor construction, making and fixing concrete slabs, reinforcing steel work, using molds to construct rings for latrines and wells, and low-cost twin-pit latrine construction. After 3 months of training the women were sent out in pairs to construct household latrines in various panchayats. But, no one was accepting these women as "masons". Strong protest was waged against them, because no one believed in the strength of the construction done by women! Ms. Thresiamma solved this problem by adding a male to the team which was withdrawn after a month. This allowed them to gain experience as well as earn visibility and acknowledgement as skilled workers. Though it was an uphill task, the first batch of 12 women emerged as agents of change in their communities. They grew into a community of 300 skilled women workers. In 1995 they were registered as an independent society known as the Jeevapoorna Women's Masons Society [JEEWOMS].²¹

The collective continues to function to this day with its activities now shifting to material production with a hollow brick making unit, tile making unit, and a door window frame making unit. Furthermore, the trained women have also acted as trainers for other skill development initiatives in Kerala - the total sanitation Mission, Nirmal 2000 and women of Kudumbashree where hundreds of women were given Masons Training creating a multiplier effect. Thresiamma Mathew's work has now shifted to the Archana Women's Centre (AWC) which has trained about 1500 women masons, 750 carpenters and plumbers AWC's work is not limited to masonry, but it includes a spectrum of livelihood skills such as tailoring, beautician training, Ferro cement technology, bamboo technology, among others. Along with skill development and entrepreneurship it focuses on community empowerment through the creation of women-led community action groups.

20. Mathew, T. (1988) New Skills, New Lives: Kerala's Women Masons. *Waterlines*, 17(1), 22-24.

21. Menon, L. (2003). Building Walls of Confidence, Jeevapoorna Women Masons Program-Kerala, Kerala Water Authority, Thrissur.



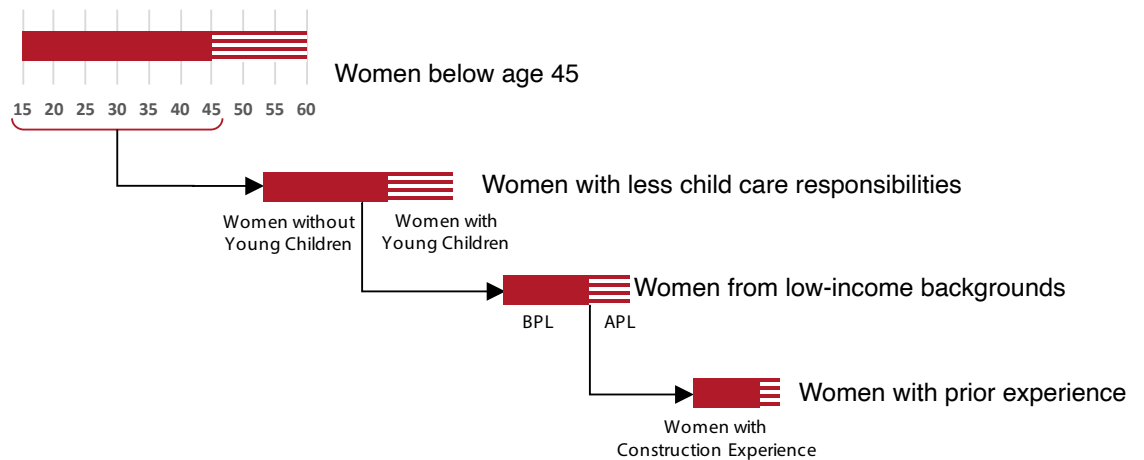
Fig 5: Social Training with 1st Batch of Trainees in 1989



Fig 6: Archana Women Centre built by Women Masons

1

Finding the Right Beneficiaries



The first batch of trainees were recruited to the skill training program from among the workers involved in the Dutch government-funded toilet construction project. However, it was found that oftentimes trained women ended up dropping out after marriage or due to child and elderly care responsibilities. This led to a revision in the selection criteria for the program as follows:

- women had to be married, below the age of 45, and from below-poverty-line households
- the intensive years of child-rearing should be over i.e. their children should be more than three years old
- women had to have prior construction experience

When these criteria were applied the retention rate for the program increased substantially. A stipend was also introduced so that the women would not lose their daily earnings while attending training. Thresiamma Mathew found that the most critical factor determining whether a woman could participate and progress in her trade was the support she received husband or family.²²

2

Integrating Gender Training along with Technical Skilling

TEN COMMANDMENTS

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 Have a definite aim to become an efficient mason | 6 Co-operate: with co-trainees and trainers |
| 2 Participate eagerly and attentively | 7 Unity: 'together we can do it' |
| 3 Be determined: 'I will become a clever mason, whatever the hurdles and struggles' | 8 Work hard and win |
| 4 Be confident: 'I can do it' | 9 Be tolerant: accept, respect and support one another |
| 5 Persevere: 'even if at first I don't succeed, I will still go on trying' | 10 Be honest and loyal |

22. Mathew, T. (1988) New Skills, New Lives: Kerala's Women Masons. *Waterlines*,17(1), 22-24.

Thresiamma Mathew describes her efforts in the initial stages of the initiative as ‘swimming against the current’. Making the women realize and acknowledge their potential was the fundamental hurdle she had to confront. Towards this objective she integrated gender training into the curriculum with participatory techniques such as songs, slogans, and games being used. The training also touched upon savings, money management, and hygiene so that the women could become more active and aware citizens.²³

Finding employment through Panchayats



Fig 7: Brick Production Unit

In the initial stages, since the training program was linked to SEUF’s water and sanitation program, the women were able to get toilet construction work in the various panchayats linked to the program. Around 15000 toilets were constructed in Thrissur under the Dutch assisted sanitation program. But once the sanitation program was completed finding work for the women construction workers became harder. The breakthrough came when through Ms Mathew’s network the women masons were able to secure a low-income housing project with a CMC convent. This allowed them to enter the housing field and gain the necessary skills for constructing affordable housing. Since they had already built relationships and visibility with local Panchayats while working on the sanitation project, they were able to secure contracts for affordable housing construction under the People’s Planning Campaign. As the group’s work progressed, they recognized their difficulty in sourcing materials for construction. This led them to foray into material production which became a supplementary and stable income source for them.²⁴

23. Interview with Ms. Thresiamma Mathew

24. Ibid.

Unsuitable Working Conditions for Women

The main source of employment for the women construction workers was through rural development projects undertaken by local panchayats. However, the avenues for placement in local projects began to decline after a few years. The women masons were not simultaneously able to break through into mainstream or private sector construction due to a number of reasons.

One of these is the profit-maximizing mentality of contractors who get most of their work done by expecting over-exploiting their workers. They prefer hiring men since they can do overtime work. A woman ability to work overtime is curtailed by her responsibilities as the primary care giver of the family. Ms Mathew notes that expecting a woman to work overtime after all her household responsibilities 'is not empowering her it is killing her.' Within AWC projects the conditions of work are configured such that 'her time and dignity are respected'. Another related reason is that the women are unable to travel long distances for work owing to their care responsibilities as well as due to safety considerations. Anytime there is a crisis at home women are expected to be present and therefore they do not have the freedom to take work far from home nor do they wish for it. Sexual exploitations and liaisons are also cited as a reason why contractors prefer not to hire women on men-only construction sites. Once Archana Women Centre conducted a construction supervision training program for young girls who were then placed on the site of Medicity, Kottayam. Within few weeks, complaints of liaisons between men and women cropped up and the program had to be discontinued.²⁵



Fig 8: Construction Supervision Trainees

25. Interview with Ms. Thresiamma Mathew

Lack of Fresh Cohorts and Health Problems of Existing Cohorts

The JEEWOMS Women's Mason's Society was initially supported by SEUF and later by a Dutch agency. However, as the program progressed funding decreased and training programs could no longer be conducted. Many of the early cadres who led the society began developing health issues such as uterine problems and were unable to take on construction work. In this scenario the material production units - the hollow bricks making unit, tile making unit and door window frame making unit - became the main income source. While it was initially hard to get men to teach them how to operate the machines, once they did the women were able to take on the work easily. This work is not only profitable, it is also suited to them because they do not have to go around searching for work.²⁶

Diversification of Skills and Emphasis on Entrepreneurship Development

When the Archana Women's Centre was set in Kottayam, the initial idea was to recreate the JEEWOMS model. But soon it expanded and shifted its focus. With education and literacy levels increasing the desirability of construction work as a profession decreased among young girls and enrollment for the mason training program decreased. Further with the Kudumbashree's Women Mason's Training program scaling up to a state-wide program, it was felt that it would be more effective to align AWC effort's with Kudumbashree's by supplying trainers to the initiative.

In the meantime, Archana Women's Centre's work began to focus on linking skill development with community empowerment. It creates Community Action Groups in the communities it works with which act as self-help groups. These groups are not only a lending agency but they are a support system for making women owners and earners. Depending on their needs and aspirations, skill training is provided in various activities such as beautician training, tailoring, ferrocement technology among others. The tailoring wing saw substantial growth during the pandemic due to the demand for PPE kits and masks. Similarly, women who have taken up training in ferrocement technology were able to take up multiple local infrastructure projects such as goat-shed construction, well recharge, rainwater harvesting in their panchayats.²⁷

26. Interview with Ms. Thresiamma Mathew



Fig 9: First Batch of Kudumbashree Trainees at Ernakulam



Fig 10: Plumbing and Well-recharging works being done by women construction workers trained

Lessons Learnt

1

Integrating Gender Training with Skill Training



Skill development cannot be approached in isolation and instead has to be linked gender training and functional literacy training that dismantles the internalized self-doubt among women and empowers them to recognize and resist gender discrimination.

2

Creating Women-Friendly Work Environments



The demand for mainstreaming women workers in productive skilled job roles in construction industry should acknowledge the double burden they bear and therefore measures for supporting their care responsibilities should be integrated.

3

Supporting Multiple Income Streams



A strategic pathway is to equip women workers with a repertoire or continuum of related skills so that they can pursue multiple income streams until they are able to establish themselves as skilled workers.

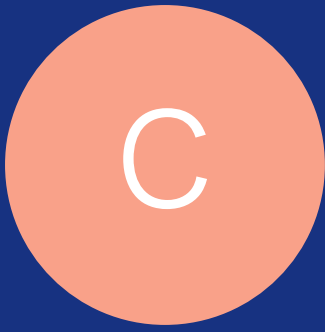
4

Women Workers as Forebearers of Community Development



Skilled women workers are to be positioned as forebearers of community development and they should be especially trained for taking on local infrastructure development projects such as affordable housing, climate resilience infrastructure, public space improvement etc.

This can become a strategic project area within which women workers are promoted thereby establishing their capability as construction workers.



Karmika School of Construction Workers



MAHILA HOUSING SEWA TRUST

Dignified Home, Dignified Work, Dignified Life

About

Mahila Housing SEWA trust (MHT) is an autonomous organisation promoted by the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), established in 1994 with the overall objective of improving habitat conditions of poor women in the informal sector. MHT's work focuses on activating women-led habitat development with a three-pronged approach that includes enhancing social capital and technical knowledge of disenfranchised communities, enhancing access to finance and habitat services, and bringing about policy changes for more inclusive planning and service delivery. Today, MHT is working in 34 cities across 8 states in India and collaborating with partners in Bangladesh and Nepal. It is a leading advocacy organisation with expertise in policy development, grassroots organizing, community development and technical know-how in land tenure, construction, management and oversight of infrastructure projects.²⁸

Genesis and Development

The context for MHT's foray into skill development for women construction workers was set by the closure of the textile mills in Ahmedabad in the 1980s and the unemployment crisis it caused. This led to an influx of migrants into the city, which increased labour supply and supported the growth of the construction industry. By 2000, construction workers were the largest group of manual labourers in Ahmedabad. SEWA started organising these workers into a union of their own in 1996. By 2000, there were approximately 50,000 women construction workers in the city and by 2006, 11,230 of them were SEWA members. Most of these women were engaged in unskilled jobs, hired on a casual basis from labour stands and paid lesser than the minimum wages. They approached MHT for skill upgradation which set the context for the program to develop.²⁹

28. <https://www.mahilahousingtrust.org/about/mission-and-approach/>

29. Baruah, B. (2010). Women and Globalisation: Challenges and Opportunities Facing Construction Workers in Contemporary India. *Development in Practice*, 20(1), 31-44.

In 2000, MHT set a Habitat Resource Centre with the support of HUDCO. The center provided training to 100 women construction workers in trades such as masonry, plastering, bar-bending and floor tiling. In 2002, Gujarat was ravaged by an earthquake that caused significant loss of life especially in districts like Surendranagar, Patna and Kachchh. These led to an urgent demand for trained masons to reconstruct houses, that are disaster resistant. MHT partnered with the Construction Industry Development Council, an organisation set up by the Planning Commission, to train and certify masons. Training was imparted to local men and women and within 3 years 5500 damaged houses were reconstructed in 30 villages. Encouraged by this success, MHT decided to set up the Karmika School for Construction Workers in September 2003. Based on a two-day International Seminar on “Empowerment of Women through Human Resource in Construction Industry” the training modules and curriculum was developed to meet the priorities and needs of the construction industry.³⁰



Fig 11: Women Construction Workers being trained to lay bricks on site

By 2006, Karmika was equipped to provide a comprehensive 3-month training modules in the following trades: masonry; painting; plastering; tiling; plumbing; electrical wiring; carpentry; welding; roller operation; excavation; rubble masonry; bar bending; and training for lab technicians. It also began to offer specialized courses in toilet construction, disaster resistant houses, climate-adaptive housing. As MHT built its technical expertise in housing sector it was able to build linkages with the private sector and certification agencies and take up skilling women construction workers at scale. In 2009, it was enrolled as Vocational Training Provider under the Director General of Employment and Training. The training expanded from Gujarat to Rajasthan, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. As of 2019, Karmika School has trained a total of 22,045 women construction workers.

30. Brahmabhatt, B. and Jhabvala, R. (2020). The City-Makers: How Women are Building a Sustainable Future for Urban India

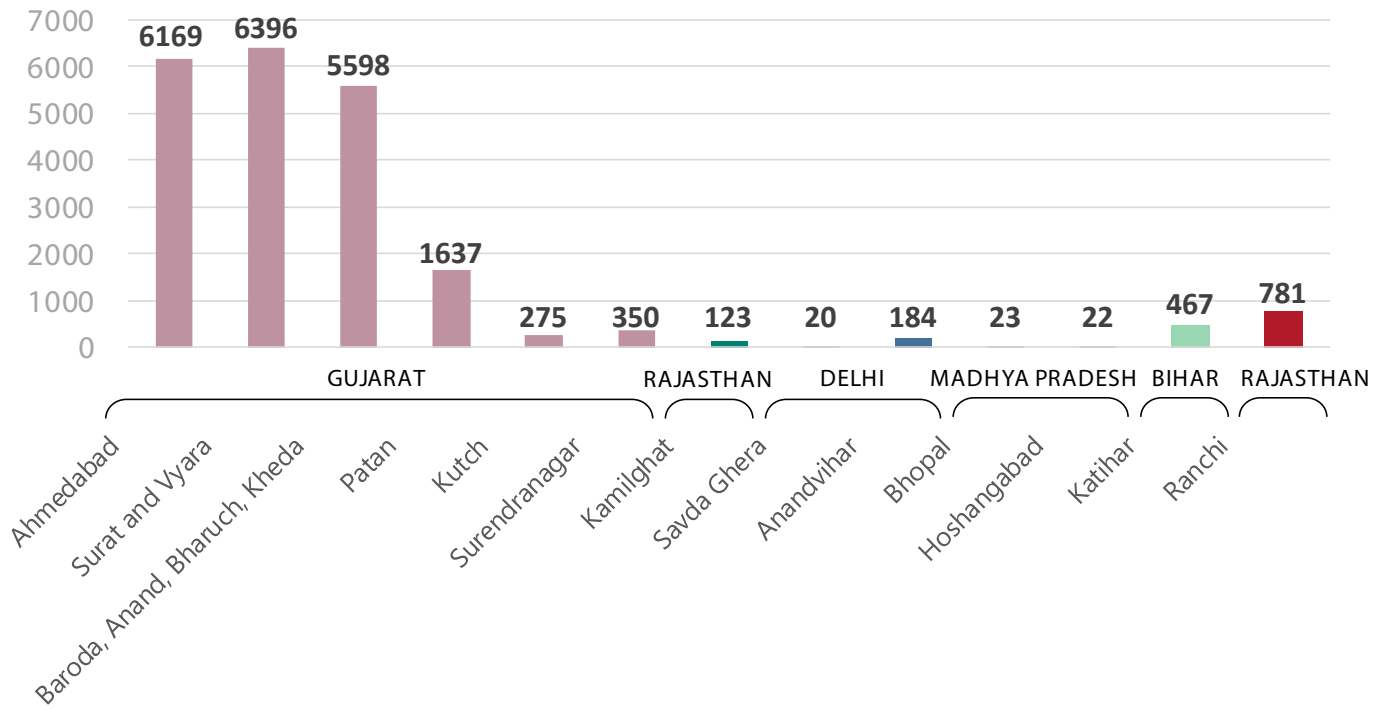


Fig 12: Number of Karmikas Trained ³¹

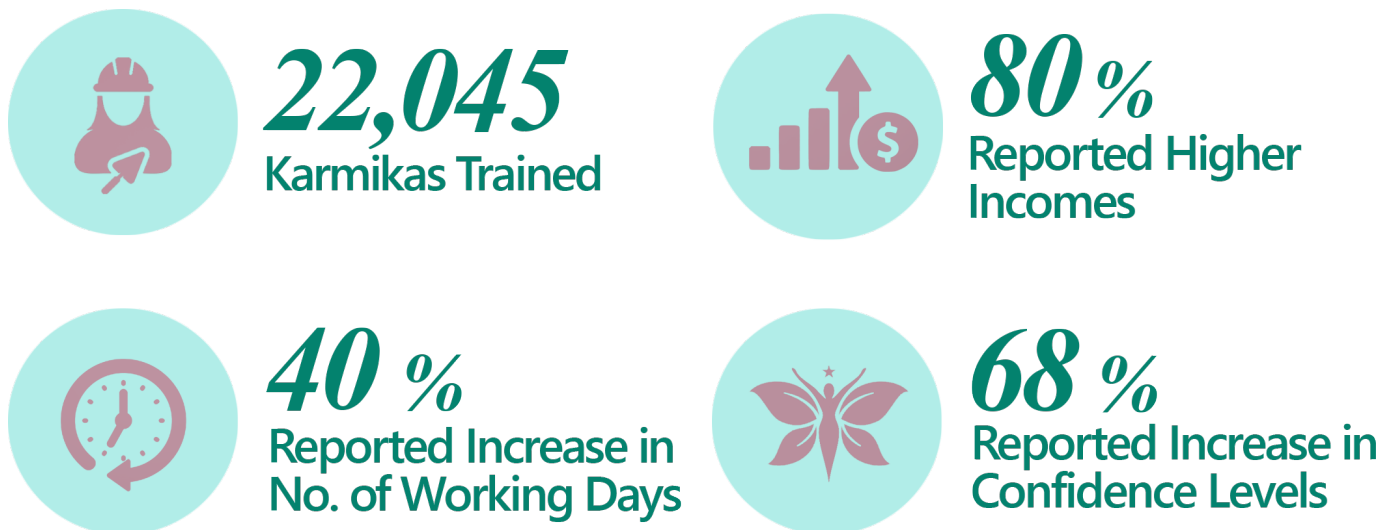
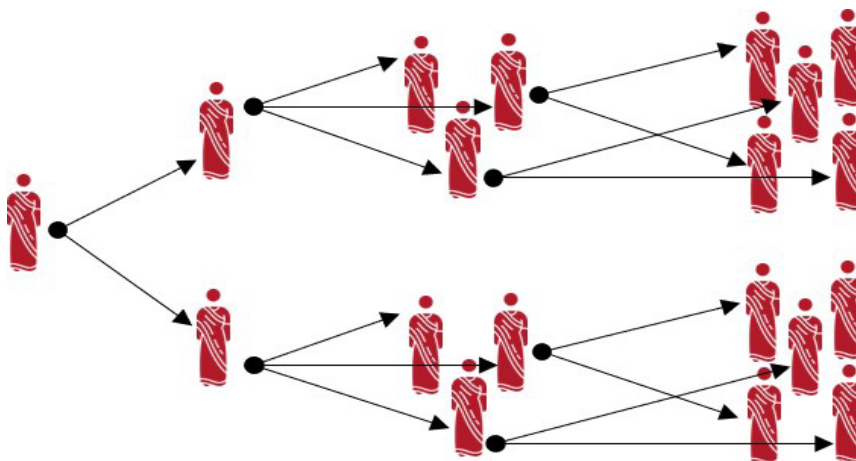


Fig 13: Impact of the Program ³²

31 and 32. Mahila Housing Trust (2019). Annual Report 2017-2019. MHT.

1

Recruitment through Prior Trainees and Exposure Visits



Trainees to the school are most young unskilled women already working in construction. Some are also unemployed women working in factory or as domestic help. Women construction workers who are members of MHT are informal workers who are hired from labour stands known as kadanayikas. Recruitment to the Karmika School happens through two routes. In the first method MHT’s teams visit kadanayikas to tell women about the training programs. Former and current trainees inform other women on construction sites about the benefits of the training. MHT also organizes exposure visits for women who show some interest, providing an opportunity to visit the Karmika School and to try their hand for a day at various trades. Women from vulnerable communities and main income earners especially encouraged to get trained. Taking into account the loss of earnings and financial burden that can prevent participation in the program, the trainees are provided with a stipend and travel allowance.³³

2

Survey-Based, Comprehensive and Flexible Training Model



33. Baruah, B. (2010). Women and Globalisation: Challenges and Opportunities Facing Construction Workers in Contemporary India. *Development in Practice*, 20(1), 31-44.

MHT conducted base surveys with women construction workers in Ahmedabad in 2003 which clearly established the need for skill training. The survey revealed that 50% of the women workers were illiterate and only 13% had more than 8 years of formal education.³⁴ This led to incorporation of functional literacy and life skills into the technical training module. The basic training covers three months. Refresher trainings are provided for those who work regularly in construction along with specialized courses of 10-12 days to gain advanced skills. There have been multiple instances wherein after taking basic masonry courses, the trainees return for specialized training in skills such as plumbing. Some women have also become trainers themselves. The training module is revised from time to time based on feedback of graduates who go to construction sites.

The most popular course is masonry, because there is a higher availability of work comparatively for women. Recognising trends of mechanisation and automation in the construction industry, going forward MHT plans to train women as crane operators, heavy vehicle operators, stone-crusher operators and mechanics for repairing earth-mover and tower cranes along with expanding to tertiary roles such as store-keepers, surveyors, account managers, and contractors.³⁵

Empowered Women Workers Claiming Skilled Jobs

The most vital impact of the training program is that it imparts self-confidence and a new identity to women workers. This is well depicted in the manner in which women who underwent training stand as a separate group at kadanayikas, are known as the 'Karmika group' and earn more. An impact study done by IIM Ahmedabad on 193 trainees found that even though only a small percentage became skilled workers, many of them became semi-skilled workers. After training 30% worked as helpers to masons, another 20% worked as masons. Even those who continued as unskilled workers reported higher wages and more working days i.e. 73% reported receiving 21-30 working days per month and 70% reported earning 70-100 Rs more after training.³⁶

Some women have also become independent contractors taking up self-construction activities or work for their relatives. In Ranchi for example, after MHT provided training to 241 women, the immediate effect was that women started constructing toilets, tanks, and renovating their house. These self-construction activities sped up and improved sanitation condition at the household level as part of the Swacch Bharat Mission.³⁷

34. Baruah, B. (2010). Women and Globalisation: Challenges and Opportunities Facing Construction Workers in Contemporary India. *Development in Practice*, 20(1), 31-44.

35. Brahmhatt, B. and Jhabvala, R. (2020). *The City-Makers: How Women are Building a Sustainable Future for Urban India*.

36. Ibid.

37. Mahila Housing Trust (2019). Annual Report 2017-2019. MHT.

MHT has also collaborated with companies such as Ambuja Cement, Larsen and Tubro (L&T) and Hindustan Construction Company, and Bakeri Constructions to train and place women workers.

Another important finding is that only 7% of the trained women reported sexual and verbal abuse as compared to 24% before training. It may be simplistic to suggest that contractors are less likely to harass trained and certified women, but it is reasonable to suggest that a combination of skills training and certification, as well as training in conflict resolution, negotiation, and assertiveness, renders women less vulnerable to sexual harassment on construction sites.³⁸

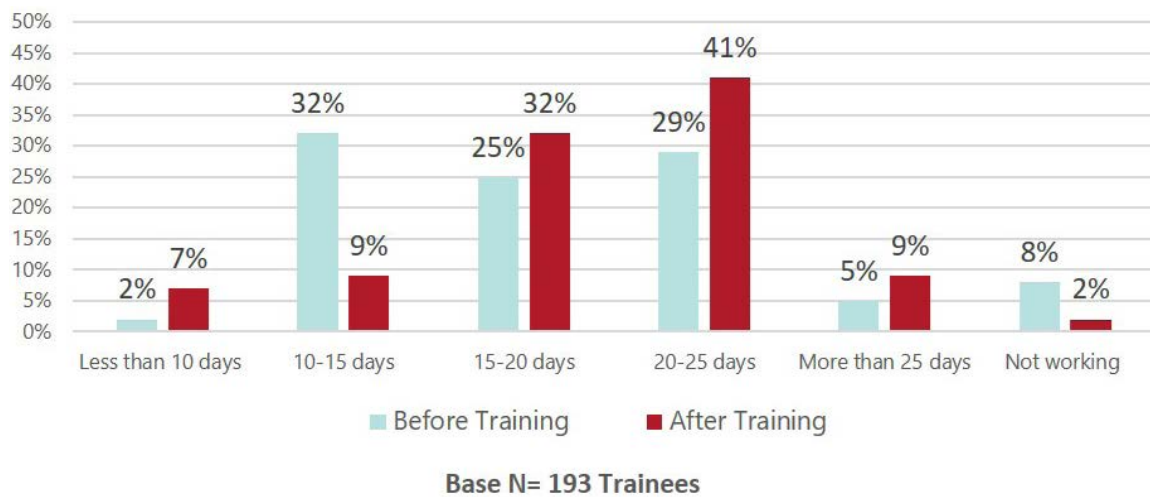


Fig 14: Impact of the Program³⁹

38. Baruah, B. (2010). Women and Globalisation: Challenges and Opportunities Facing Construction Workers in Contemporary India. *Development in Practice*, 20(1), 31-44.

39. As per data provided by Mahila Housing Trust

1

Gaining Acceptability for Skilled Women Workers in the Workplace

While skilling and certification is good step forward, and it is hoped that it will lead to sustainable employment, evidence suggests that it is easier to get skills than to find jobs as skilled workers. The women reported that they were able to gain more acknowledgement as skilled workers in their social environment than in their work environments. Lack of acceptance was cited as the main reason why women were not able to get skilled jobs. They are not allowed to take on skilled jobs even when the male mason is absent. Male workers are threatened by their efforts and make comments such as ‘We have been doing this work for a long time. Are unskilled women going to teach us now?’ Contractors question the value of the training saying ‘how can they become skilled workers by just attending one training’ and claiming that ‘they attend the training only to get the stipend’.⁴⁰

Another barrier for women seeking skilled jobs is the excess availability of labour combined with their lack of information about work opportunities. Family responsibilities limit women from being able to travel long distances and they have to choose worksites viable for childcare. Added to this is the risk of sexual harassment on site. All of these factors limit the number of opportunities for skilled work that women are able to avail.

2

Lack of sustained funding, infrastructural, and technical assistance

Despite its proven competence in training women and women workers proving their capabilities as skilled workers, MHT has struggled to sustained funding for the program. This is counterintuitive given the skill demand in the construction industry. Funds are required to provide stipends to women workers. The payment of a stipend ensures that women’s eagerness to learn new skills does not translate into domestic financial crises due to loss of income. This has however emerged as a double-edged sword.

While it allows women to sustain themselves and their families during the training, but it also attracts women who are not really interested in pursuing construction work. Women are open about the fact that they are engaged in construction work out of economic necessity and that they don’t want their daughters to do this job. Yet many bring daughters to training in interest of earning stipend. Resolving this will require a careful screening of trainees along with concerted efforts to enhance the dignity associated with construction work.⁴¹

40. Brahmabhatt, B. and Jhabvala, R. (2020). The City-Makers: How Women are Building a Sustainable Future for Urban India.

41. Ibid

Another area of fund requirement is for purchasing new and advanced machinery for a range of construction tasks. This is especially important for availing jobs in infrastructure projects where wages are higher better and where demand is bound to rise in the coming years. Investment in machinery can also become a source of income for the training program by renting out the machinery to construction sites. For example, MHT would like to acquire vans equipped with laboratories for testing the purity and grade of building materials. Trained lab technicians could travel to different sites and charge a fee for their services.⁴²

Difficulties with Placement on Large-scale Private Sector Projects

While MHT trainees find work on rural housing projects and slum up-grading projects, more lucrative infrastructure projects such as highways, freeways, and metro systems remain virtually untouched. With skill deficit in the infrastructure sector worsening, companies like LandT and HCC have set up their own training centres. In 2007 LnT's Construction Skill Training Institute (CSTI) in Ahmedabad approached MHT to help source trainees for its bar bending and shuttering course. This collaboration revealed the difficulties in influencing private sector stakeholders towards adopting gender-friendly practices.

A mixed batch approach was followed and this was the first-time women participated in the training at CSTI. Out of the 38 trainees, 25 were women. However, some of the trainers saw the inclusion of women as trouble since 'they need to be provided separate toilet and childcare facilities' and claimed that 'male trainees get distracted due to female trainees'. Transport was another issue with CSTI refusing to pay conveyance fees for the female trainees. After the course, the trainees were placed for on-the-job training in Baroda. While they were able to complete jobs much more efficiently than men, problems such as sub-standard housing, inadequate toilet facilities, and mistreatment by male workers emerged.⁴³

This experience revealed how the formal private sector is much more closed with large construction companies citing the lack of childcare and lack of separate facilities as barriers to hiring women. Changing this will require substantial efforts from NGOs like MHT in sensitizing private sector and public sector on contributions skilled women can make to construction industry. In Ranchi, MHT has begun to collaborate with stakeholders such as petty contractors, mid-level contractors and state registered contractors, builder associations, development and government agencies including the state public works departments by conducting bi-monthly meetings with them to tell them about the diverse training provided by the institution and the capacities built.⁴⁴

42. Baruah, B. (2010). Women and Globalisation: Challenges and Opportunities Facing Construction Workers in Contemporary India. *Development in Practice*, 20(1), 31-44.

43. Brahmhatt, B. and Jhabvala, R. (2020). *The City-Makers: How Women are Building a Sustainable Future for Urban India*.

44. Mahila Housing Trust (2019). Annual Report 2017-2019. MHT.

Galalben Chawda



Through hard and honest work I am working towards achieving my goals.

Galalben Chawda, is a 38 year old construction contractor from Sant Rohidas Nagar, Ahmedabad. Before she joined Karmika in 2003, she used to work as a mason-helper doing odd jobs on different building sites. As she shares, “Initially, I was hesitant to join considering that I had to forego my daily wages of Rs 100 for a stipend of Rs 60. However, the fact that they were offering both the practical as well as theoretical training sounded interesting to me. I learnt a lot in my first training on masonry and plastering but found that I could not handle independent jobs with confidence. So I undertook another 3 month training programme in 2005 and learnt several skills in more depth. Later on in 2007, I also underwent another plumbing training as I was already building the toilets, water tanks and wanted to have an additional income by doing water fittings myself.”

She faced considerable difficulties in getting jobs as a skilled woman construction worker, “The contractors and other masons doubted my abilities, and the only way for me to change this was to demonstrate my talent. That I did. As I started to prove myself, I managed to find regular work for 2 years.” This increased her confidence level as she further adds, “Before I got involved with Karmika School, I used to work on average of 25 day per month, almost always on a 9 hour shift and still couldn’t make ends meets. Today, even a 5-day job/month earns me enough money to run the household. Prior to my involvement, I had little respect at home.

Now I am recognised, respected and appreciated due to my work. Even the Gujarat Samachar newspaper came over to cover my story in 2009. Furthermore, I have received a large number of certificates from various organisations also, to give merit for my work and this also lets me secure government tenders.”

Today she is able to do a range of construction related skilled jobs. In fact, after the first two years of work, in 2007, when she had saved enough money to renovate her own home, she built all of it herself- right from bricklaying to plastering to flooring to decorating. Where outside contractors would take Rs 80,000-90,000 to do this work, it cost her only Rs 55,000. Today for her, in her own words “the sky is the limit, and through hard and honest work I am working towards achieving my goals.”

Policy Constraints to Mainstreaming Skilled Women Construction Workers

Training, certification and placement of skilled women workers faces significant policy constraints at every level. Over the years MHT has taken multiple steps to advocate policy changes favorable to women workers. Another major challenge is the eligibility criteria which puts formal training out of bounds for a large share women construction workers. In 2009, Karmika enrolled as a Vocational Training Programme (VTP) under the Director General of Employment and Training (DGET). MHT worked with them to negotiate the eligibility criteria and successfully repealed 5th pass as eligibility criteria for 5 trades in the construction sector.

MHT partnered with CIDC to undertake testing and certification and with IGNOU to facilitate distance learning programmes. While there is a great emphasis of skill training and certification, the costs of certification has now moved up to 2000/-, and this without any value addition to the worker's income. However, there is no government directive or incentive for the formal sector to employ certified workers. Efforts so far have been on a relatively smaller group.⁴⁵ But the demand for skilled manpower is much more and even more is the number of poor construction workers in need of better livelihood opportunities. Therefore, there is a need for creating a strategy at scale with a network of institutions. Tie-ups should be established with various training institutions and grassroot organisations.

45. Mahila Housing Trust (2014). Annual Report 2012-2013. MHT.

Lessons Learnt

1

Need for Strategy at Scale



Only a relatively small group of women have been reached through the skill training program. There is an urgent need for scaling up, given both the skill demand in the construction industry as well the dire situation of women construction workers. More importantly only by creating strategy at scale can the entrenched practices in the construction industry be dismantled to create space and dignity.

2

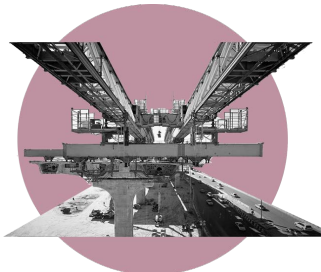
Demand-based and Flexible Training Modules



A key success factor for the Karmika School is its approach in providing demand based and flexible training modules of varying lengths and specializations. This allows trainees to continuously upskill themselves depends on their needs and interests as they venture into skilled jobs and entrepreneurship.

3

Tapping into Opportunities in Infrastructure Sector



The infrastructure sector is bound to show considerable growth in the coming years. However to tap into opportunities in this space women have to be trained in job roles such as stone-cutting, JCB operator, mechanic etc. Along with this, private sector stakeholders have to sensitized on the capability of women workers.

4

Affirmative Policy Action that Reserves Positions for Women



Simply improving education and training for women is not going to be the answer. There needs to affirmative policy action making it mandatory for public and private sector companies to give preference to women skilled workers. Industry should also be incentivised to hire certified workers which can open up opportunities for women workers.



Habitat for Humanity Project Nir- manshree



Habitat for Humanity India

Through Shelter We Empower

About

Habitat for Humanity is a non-profit organisation building strength, stability and self-reliance through affordable housing and sanitation facilities. Founded in 1983, it is one of the largest housing programmes in the Asia-Pacific region and is affiliated to Habitat For Humanity International. The organisation's work is distributed along three areas of Housing, Sanitation and Disaster Risk Reduction and Response. Beyond building homes the organisation also provides support for microfinance, maintenance and repairs, and property documentation. A similar holistic approach is followed with respect to sanitation interventions with efforts taken to drive behaviour change and monitor change. So far, 62,998 homes and 72,638 sanitation units have been built across the country.⁴⁶

Genesis and Development

Nirman, literally translated from Hindi, means 'construction'. Shree, a Hindi adaptation from the Sanskrit language, denotes the female gender. The intended meaning of Nirmanshree, in combining the two words, is 'Building Women'. This 3-year project is funded by the European Union, and implemented by Habitat India and is focused on two districts in Odisha (Dhenkanal and Jajpur) and two districts in Maharashtra (Osmanabad and Beed).⁴⁷ There are two overlapping issues that the project aims to address. Firstly, the challenge of housing inadequacy in rural areas with related issues of lack of access to micro-finance, poor quality construction, lack of access to basic amenities, and denial of property rights. The second issue is the limited economic participation of women who have to bear larger share of care responsibilities, are confined to

46. <https://habitatindia.org/about/>

47. <https://habitatindia.org/resources/>

unskilled low-paying jobs and are denied equal wages. Reading these two issues together, the Nirmanshree project aims to empower groups of marginalized women by creating economic opportunities around habitat development i.e. the housing ecosystem which includes housing, energy, water and sanitation, energy and livelihood.

The Nirmanshree Project will provide technical and non-technical training for 3000 marginalized women (entrepreneurs from selected women federations including women and girls) in job roles in the construction and housing sector. Further, it will promote 50 women-led enterprises around the housing supply chain through entrepreneurship training and by creating effective linkages with key stakeholders. By focusing on improved employability and livelihood generation for marginalized women the program's aim is to improve housing delivery in these villages and improve access to rights and entitlements. The project is set to impact two lakh families, one lakh in Odisha and one lakh in Maharashtra.

The project took off in the wake of the pandemic in January 2020. Implementation began with human resource and project planning. The exigencies of pandemic meant that training could not be started immediately. Until December 2020, the focus was on conducted a baseline study and stakeholder engagement. A comparative study was conducted between the four districts to understand market dynamics, existing micro-enterprises and stakeholders. There was also resource mapping done in 30 villages to understand the housing condition and housing ecosystem. Women federations were the key network through which participants for the program were mobilized. 45 planning meetings were conducted with women federations in which 324 women and 14 men participated. Additionally, 49 stakeholder meetings were conducted with government departments, micro-finance institution heads, and Panchayath leaders. These relationships set the context for the program and supported its implementation.⁴⁸

48. Ibid.

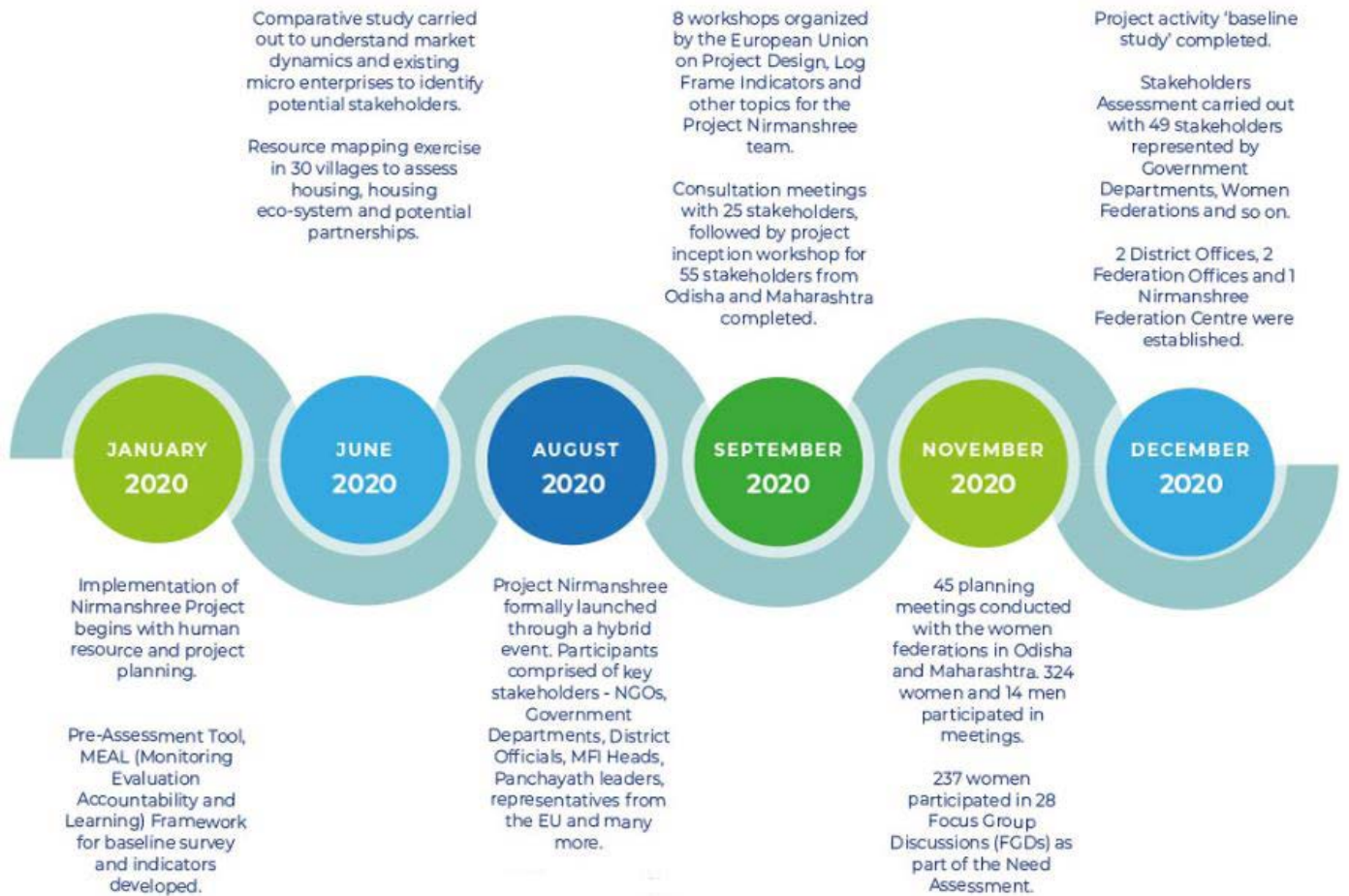


Fig 15: Project Timeline 49



Fig 16: Project Nirmanshree being implemented

49. <https://habitatindia.org/nirmanshree/>

1

Recruitment through SHG Network

The recruitment and mobilization was anchored by personnel selected from the SHG network called 'Nirmanshree Messengers'. They travelled from door-to-door for conducting interviews and FGDs and for spreading information on the program. Since they were well known by the community, participation was strengthened by their involvement. The training was conducted in job roles such as masonry, plumbing, electrical, and carpentry and was provided by Construction Skill Development Council of India (CSDCI) certified trainers. Upon completion, the candidates are subjected to a third-party assessment for certification from the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) and Skill India. In addition to technical training, the curriculum included training on Enterprise Development Program (EDP), Women Empowerment and Awareness on Social Entitlement, Low-carbon Emission Products and Rainwater Harvesting. This learner-focused approach ensured that along with technical skills women developed their entrepreneurial capacities and would be able to access employment opportunities. Further, it equipped women with the skills for implementing green housing technologies, thereby enhancing climate change adaptability at the community level.⁵⁰

2

Supporting Women-Led Micro-Enterprises in Housing Sector



200 potential women entrepreneurs were given training and handholding support to establish and expand 50 women-led enterprises in the housing and construction sector. The products sold by these enterprises included cement bricks, cement rings, sanitary items, phenyl, smokeless stove, construction

50. <https://www.csrmandate.org/housing-non-profit-habitat-for-humanity-india-to-train-3000-women-for-post-pandemic-recovery-in-housing-sector-under-project-nirmanshree/>

materials such as fly ash, bricks, cement, sand and household items such as brooms and foot mats. The training focused on enhancing women's self-confidence and capacities for developing a clear business model. The objective was to help them make informed decisions with understanding of capital, net profit, how much would be the reflow of capital and funds, their turnover, their margin, and return on investment. Along with this Habitat India provided handholding support for establishing backward and forward market linkages and marketing products. One route through which this was done was through utilization of Nirmanshree products and services in Habitat India's own housing projects. Another key strategy employed was empowering women entrepreneurs with information on availing entitlements related housing, sanitation and energy and credit for micro-enterprises. This included seed funding from schemes such as Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana, Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme, and Unemployed Youth Employment Generation Program among others. The awareness building strategy was significantly supported by the use of technology in the form of the Nirman App. The application acts as a digital learning platform for the women entrepreneurs and acts as a one-stop-solution for marketing and branding for housing support systems.

3

Creating Favorable Policy Environment and Stakeholder Engagement

In the short term, the training and entrepreneurship building for women workers would address the growing demand for skilled workers in the housing sector, and improve the housing supply in the program villages. In the long-term the program aims to strengthen the voice of women and women federations in undertaking policy dialogue with decision makers and participating in habitat-related interventions. To realize this aim, Habitat India started by creating market linkages with all key stakeholders at the village level. This included micro-financing institutions, skilling and vocational training institutions, contractors and vendors. Effective partnerships were also developed with government stakeholders at the panchayat, block and district level with the focus being on improving accessibility of housing and other social entitlements for marginalized families. Stakeholders were asked to share information related to development schemes and delivery mechanisms, so as to identify recommendations for improving policy and program implementation at the local level.

1

Program Delivery Under Pandemic Condition

One of the key challenges for the program delivery was the onset of the pandemic. The disruption in livelihoods caused by the pandemic added a layer of urgency to the skill training of women workers, and facilitating their economic participation post-pandemic became an additional goal. The program timeline and mobilization and training formats had to be adapted. While initially online training was experimented with, they did not prove effective. The program focus shifted to responding to the community's immediate health, food, and livelihood issues. A parallel program called 'Route to Recovery' was implemented which helped the community cope with the pandemic by providing food and medical kits, conducting Covid-19 protocol trainings and facilitating access to hospitals. This program kept the relationship with the community active and enhanced receptivity to the training program when it was later launched. Additionally, the Nirmanshree team utilized this time to collect baseline data and build stakeholder relationships with women federations, government officers, micro-finance institutions and private contractors and vendors amongst others. These relationships ensured that the program responded to the local market conditions.⁵¹

2

Patriarchal Misconceptions Internalized by Women Workers

As the team began interacting with the community, they identified that patriarchal misconceptions held by the women themselves regarding their capacities prevented them from accessing livelihood opportunities. They did not know or believe that they could be masons or business owners. Therefore, the first step for the program was tackling these misconceptions and enhancing confidence of the women workers. The partnership of the women self-help group federation was sought for this. Until then the work of SHGs had been focused on financial capacity-building and there was limited engagement with the housing ecosystem. The Nirmanshree project bridged this gap. Personnel were selected from the SHG network to act as 'Nirmanshree Messengers' to personally reach the women of the community, spread information regarding the program and enlist participants. Trainees and entrepreneurs were selected from within the SHG network and equipped with the knowledge and skills to contribute to the housing and construction sector. This strategy of confidence building for the collective as a whole and not just the individual proved more effective in shifting socio-cultural attitudes and practices. The demand for equitable livelihood opportunities was strengthened and there was positive reinforcement between the SHG members themselves.⁵²

51. Interview with Team Member of Project Nirmanshree

52. Ibid

Need for Stakeholder Engagement and Women-Led Governance at the Local Level

The Nirmanshree project recognized that skill development for women workers could not be approached in isolation. To ensure that the training translates into improved livelihoods and increased income it is necessary to engage with multiple stakeholders at the local level to create a favorable environment for women workers. For example, Project Nirmanshree engaged with contractors and vendors at the local level through multiple meetings and convinced them to hire women workers and pay equal wages. This ensured that all the trainees were able to find jobs as masons post training. Another area of focus for the program was to enhance the participation of women in local governance and so that plans and programs at the local level reflect sensitivity to gender-based vulnerabilities. While there are many beneficial laws, policies, and schemes devised at the national and state level, their implementation at the local level is limited. It is necessary to identify these implementation gaps from the bottom-up through engagement with the community, PRIs, and other government functionaries at the local level. Awareness has to be built with local government functionaries and community collectives on the various provisions of the laws and responsibilities associated with it.⁵³

53. Interview with Team Member of Project Nirmanshree

Deepanjali



I want to expand my business so that I can provide employment to other people in my village

Deepanjali Behera and her husband Kartikeshwar, live with their children Sweety, Deepika and Pratush, in Dhenkanal district, Odisha. As a child, Deepanjali always aspired to learn new skills. She would eventually go on to learn how to design different products and artefacts using cement. Her work with cement progressed and Deepanjali shifted her focus from creating flowerpots and cement rings to making doors and window frames in hopes that this would bring in additional income to support her family.

Noticing her interest in creating a workshop, her family were also willing to help in any way they could. Her husband helped her set up a workshop in the backyard of their house. Her daughter, who studies Architecture, helps her mother with new product designs based on the requirements. Deepanjali, who is also keen on supporting her community, has been associated with Adishakti Self Help Group which works under the Dhenkanal Municipality for the management of waste materials in the village. After learning about Project Nirmanshree – funded by the EU, Deepanjali worked as a Nirmanshree Messenger to raise awareness about the project in support of women in the community. Later, she enrolled as an entrepreneur, aiming to expand her business and to create new jobs for her community.

“Currently, I have one person supporting me in my workshop. I want to expand my business so that I can provide employment to other people in my village. My association with Habitat for Humanity is helping me enhance my skills and diversify my products,” says Deepanjali. Since the launch of Project Nirmanshree’s Entrepreneurship Development Program training, Deepanjali Behera from Dhenkanal, Odisha has become the first woman entrepreneur to receive an enterprise loan under the Prime Minister’s Employment Generation Program (PMEGP) to construct a shed so she can manufacture more cement products such as doors, windows frames, pavement blocks, cement rings and ventilators.

Lessons Learnt

1

Orienting Skill Development Program for Impact at Scale



A key factor that enabled the success of the Nirmanshree program was its focus on the collective and not just the individual. Awareness was a key issue as many of the women workers weren't aware of the avenues and potential they had to enter into the skilled workforce. Building awareness at the community/collective scale provided more strength to the initiative. Once awareness is built, the next step is to build confidence by participating in skilled work and accessing work opportunities.

2

Engaging with Stakeholders at the Local Level



The highly fragmented nature of the construction industry and the housing sector means that a critical stakeholder group that is often left out is the local ecosystem of contractors, sub-contractors, vendors, and micro-finance institutions. Nirmanshree's efforts to engage with this stakeholder group created a favorable environment for women entrepreneurs and ensured sustainability of the women-led micro-enterprises by facilitating backward and forward linkages.

3

Addressing Policy Implementation at the Local Level



There is no dearth of schemes that support women construction workers and entrepreneurs. However, the challenge is in terms of its implementation at the local level. Nirmanshree addressed this gap by empowering women with awareness of the schemes and entitlements they are eligible for. By building their self-confidence and awareness the program strengthened their participation in local governance activities such as Gram Sabha meetings. Overall, the capacity of PRIs to identify and respond to gender-based vulnerabilities in housing and employment was strengthened.

Comparing the Positive Initiatives

Program	Kudumbashree Womens Masons Training Program	JEEWOMS Women Masons Society	Karmika School of Construction Workers	Project Nirmanshree
Founding Organisation	Kudumbashree	Archana Womens Centre	Mahila Housing Trust	Habitat for Humanity India
Start Date	2014	2004	2003	2020
Theory of Change	<p>Recruitment through Kudumbashree's Network</p> <p>Three Phase Training Program</p> <p>Micro-enterprise Building and Convergence with PRIs</p>	<p>Finding the Right Beneficiaries</p> <p>Integrating Gender Training along with Technical Skilling</p> <p>Finding employment through Panchayats</p>	<p>Recruitment through prior trainees and exposure visits</p> <p>Survey-Based, Comprehensive and Flexible Training Model</p> <p>Empowered Women Workers Claiming Skilled Jobs</p>	<p>Recruitment through SHG Network</p> <p>Supporting Women-Led Micro-Enterprises in Housing Sector</p> <p>Creating Favorable Policy Environment and Stakeholder Engagement</p>
Challenges	<p>Skill Gap that Remains</p> <p>Reliance on District Mission Authorities</p> <p>Need for working capital</p> <p>Need for machinery</p> <p>Insufficient implementation of the directives to LSGs</p>	<p>Unsuitable Working Conditions for Women</p> <p>Lack of Fresh Cohorts and Health Problems of Existing Cohorts</p> <p>Diversification of Skills and Emphasis on Entrepreneurship Development</p>	<p>Gaining Acceptability for Skilled Women Workers in the Workplace</p> <p>Lack of sustained funding, infrastructural, and technical assistance</p> <p>Difficulties with placement on large-scale private sector projects</p> <p>Policy Constraints to Mainstreaming Skilled Women Construction Workers</p>	<p>Program Delivery Under Pandemic Condition</p> <p>Patriarchal Misconceptions Internalized by Women Workers</p> <p>Need for Stakeholder Engagement and Women-Led Governance at the Local Level</p>
Lessons Learnt	<p>Mainstreaming Versus Self-Employment Generation</p> <p>Support for Women-Led Microenterprises</p> <p>Convergence with Panchayati Raj Institutions</p>	<p>Integrating Gender Training with Skill Training</p> <p>Creating Women-Friendly Work Environments</p> <p>Supporting Multiple Income Streams</p> <p>Women Workers as Forebearers of Community Development</p>	<p>Need for Strategy at Scale</p> <p>Demand-based and Flexible Training Modules</p> <p>Tapping into Opportunities in Infrastructure Sector</p> <p>Affirmative Policy Action that Reserves Positions for Women</p>	<p>Orienting Skill Development Program for Impact at Scale</p> <p>Engaging with Stakeholders at the Local Level</p> <p>Addressing Policy Implementation at the Local Level</p>

Challenges and Recommendations



The Challenge

There has been an increase in the number and types of training avenues available to women construction workers with the introduction of the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) and the influx of NGOs in the skill development sector. However, this increase in access to training avenues has not resulted in any substantial change in the construction industry. Even after obtaining skills against all odds, women are denied jobs and do not receive equal pay. Skilling alone cannot guarantee better jobs and income. In the present situation employers in the construction industry have limited incentive or motivation to hire women as skilled workers. This situation can only change if the government introduces policies, regulations, or standards that changes labour hiring practices in the construction industry.

Discussion and Recommendation I:

Reserve a Percentage of Skilled Jobs in Public Sector Construction Projects for Women

In India, reservations have frequently been used to mandate the socio-economic upliftment of historically marginalised communities; for example, the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution in 1992, which mandated that 33% of the seats in the Panchayat level be reserved for women. While initially there were practices such as 'Pati Sarpanch' (elected female representatives being sidelined or controlled by their husbands), today it is possible to see real improvements in the political representation of women. The question that thus arises is if the use of reservations can be extended towards enhancing access to jobs for women in public and private industry as well.

As it stands labour hiring practices in India's construction industry are highly informalised and fragmented. In any given project, tasks are divided functionally and sub-contracted to trade-specific contractors. Subcontractors either recruit labour for their own requirements, or they rely on labour contractors to find and bring the required number of workers to the worksite. Due to its highly fragmented and informalised nature, this labour hiring system is difficult to regulate. This in turn has had its impact on the labour quality and skill composition of the construction industry. The Working Group on Construction Industry as part of 11th Five-Year plan comments that 'the proportion of skilled workers in the industry has been substantially and consistently decreasing and the end result is slow progress of work, rampant time and cost overruns, low productivity and quality, and eventually low-value addition.'

While it might be difficult to directly implement job reservations in the private sector, the Working Group on Construction Industry as part of 11th Five-Year plan provides some useful suggestions on how labour hiring practices of industry stakeholders can be influenced: 'Availability of some minimum percentage of skilled and certified manpower with contractors should be made part of contract requirement for different categories of projects based on value'.

Extending this suggestion, we put forward that availability of a minimum percentage of skilled and certified women workers should be made part of the contract requirement for different categories of projects, especially for public sector construction projects. The public sector accounts for 27.4% of the fixed capital formation in the construction industry, and influencing labour hiring practices in such construction projects can have a significant impact on the construction industry as a whole.

Another avenue for incentivising construction industry employers to hire and place skilled women workers is through certification procedures such as GRIHA (Green Rating for Integrated Habitat Assessment), IGBC (Indian Green Building Council), and LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). The rating criteria can incorporate indicators that assess the company's contribution towards skilling, hiring, and ensuring adequate living and working conditions for women construction workers.

While putting forward the suggestion for reservation it must be stated that along creating jobs for women workers it is necessary to ensure there is a supply of skilled women construction workers to take on these positions. Creating cadres of skilled women workers will require coordinated efforts of skilling institutions, civil society, and women collectives amongst others. While there have been many initiatives especially by civil society organisations to train and employ skilled women construction workers these have been small in scale. There is an urgent need to scale up these programs through government and industry support. Another aspect of ensuring supply of skilled women construction workers is to ensure that the living and working conditions at construction sites are improved. As it stands there has been limited implementation of key laws such as Building and Other Construction Workers Act, Minimum Wages Act, Interstate Migrant Workers Act due to which women construction workers do not have adequate access to toilet and drinking facilities, housing facilities, and creches. Large construction companies and industry associations have to lead the way in creating women-friendly construction sites thereby triggering large scale change in the construction industry.

The Challenge

Recognising the existing gender barriers in the construction industry, many organisations spearheading skill development initiatives for women construction workers have focused on entrepreneurship and micro-enterprise building. This approach has allowed them to directly facilitate employment of women workers in skilled jobs without having to depend on private sector employers. Women-led microenterprises are especially promoted in community development projects such as affordable housing, toilet construction, rain-water harvesting tanks etc. However, it is often seen that these women-led micro-enterprises lack sustainability. Some of the reasons for this are the lack of working capital, lack of access to machinery, insufficient training in project management, and opaque business practices. Addressing these issues will require creating a robust support-ecosystem for women construction workers.

Discussion and Recommendation II:

Build A Support Ecosystem for Women-Led Micro-Enterprises in the Construction Industry

One of the key characteristics of the construction industry is its low entry barriers which have resulted in a highly fragmented structure. It is also one of the key reasons the industry is a key employer of women, especially those with low education levels and disadvantaged backgrounds. The NSDC Report on the Construction Industry states that out of the 3 million construction entities (including housing contractors) that existed, only around 28,000 were registered. There is more fragmentation in the housing segment than the industrial/ infrastructure segment, as the unorganised sector accounts for 75% of the same.

However, in the experience of the various civil society organisations it was seen that the women-led microenterprises face significant difficulties in sustaining and scaling up their operations. Civil society organisations were able to secure pilot projects for training the women construction groups by developing partnerships with government schemes such as PMAY or Swacch Bharat Mission. This interlinkage had two benefits. In addition to skilling and enhancing employability of women workers it contributed to community development with more effective engagement with vulnerable populations. However, once these projects were completed, the women groups were not able find and take on projects on their own.

The most common reason cited for this was the lack of working capital. Women-led micro-enterprises found it difficult to bid for construction projects because of the high financial criteria set on certain bids. There were often limits to the loans they could advance from self-help groups and other micro-credit facilities they depended on. The lack of funds also limited their ability to acquire the machinery required or hire additional labour which increased the work-load on them. Even when women were able to secure the funds required and take on the projects, payments to them were delayed which discouraged them from taking on further projects.

Addressing this problem will require a creating dedicated funds for supporting women-led micro-enterprises in the construction industry. While there are programs such as the MUDRA loan scheme and Stree Shakti Yojana, it is often seen that women groups lack awareness of these schemes and lack know-how on how to apply and secure funds. Construction industry associations and large construction companies can also provide support to women-led micro-enterprises especially through their CSR funds.

In addition to providing funds, it will be useful to develop cooperation between women construction groups. This will allow them to pool their financial and skill resources and take on construction projects more effectively. One potential innovation that this would allow is a machinery bank from which various groups can rent equipment for their projects. This will allow them to significantly cut down capital costs and share maintenance costs. Furthermore, it will widen the scope of projects that they can take on especially with respect to infrastructure sector projects which requires specialised equipment and pays significantly more.

The Challenge

The increase in automation and mechanisation has had significant impacts on the skill demand in the construction industry. Unskilled, low productivity manual labour jobs, which employs the maximum number of workers, are becoming more obsolete. This shift will especially impact women workers since they are employed almost exclusively in such positions. Upskilling women workers for future ready job roles is essential not only from a social development perspective but also to unlock the economic productivity of a large share of the workforce.

Discussion and Recommendation III:

Shifting focus to Higher Skilled and Higher Productivity Jobs in the Construction Industry

While there has been an increase in the skilling avenues available to women workers in construction industry especially with the introduction of the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana and training models such as Recognition of Prior Learning the focus of these programs remains on skills at the lower tiers of the skilling hierarchy with the highest participation seen in training for masonry job roles. While these skilled jobs can provide slightly higher incomes, their physically taxing nature is disadvantageous to women. The focus should instead move to higher skilled and higher productivity jobs such as electrician, plumber, contractor etc. which has better job security and better social status associated with it.

The NSDC Report on skilling needs in the construction industry predicts that ‘The number of persons required on a comparable site will go down but the minimum skill levels would go up.’ As it stands skilled workers only constitute a mere 17% of the total workforce. The report also states that substantial efforts towards skill building for Skill Level 2 jobs such as carpenters, electricians, welders, operators, plumbers etc. is essential to sustain the growth of the industry. The report also emphasizes that there will be an emphasis on facility management. There will be a demand for personnel who are able to provide end-to-end services such as security services, plumbing services, gas pipe services, food services etc. as the extent of organisation in the construction sector increases. Another area of demand is the green economy. It is estimated that 50 million green jobs will be created worldwide in the next 20 years for provision of renewable energy, water and sanitation infrastructure and green housing.

These specific skilling demands in the construction industry can be leveraged as a strategic pathway for promoting gender equality. By identifying the high demand job roles in the industry and skilling women in these job roles we would be able to meet the industry’s skill demand along with raising the status of women workers. There is a need to pilot-specific training programs, qualification packs and certification systems for job roles in these future demand areas. Within these programs the participation of women should be promoted through reservations or incentives such as fee reductions and loans.

The EY report on gender constraints in skilling suggests two construction related job roles where women can be strategically mainstreamed. These are JCB Operator and Civil Land Surveyor. With the Union Budget setting a capital outlay of 5.54 crore for the infrastructure sector, the civil engineering component of the construction sector is going to see a huge boost. Operators will be needed as activities requiring usage of heavy machinery increases. Civil land surveyors will be needed as topographic surveys are instrumental in achieving successful civil engineering, architectural and structural design elements. However, to successfully achieve the mainstreaming of women in these upcoming roles, it is necessary that employers take steps to create women-friendly work environments.

The Challenge

It is well acknowledged that labour laws in the country have been built around the assumption of a 'standard employment relationship', leaving out of its ambit informal workers who constitute more than 90% of the total workforce. While there have been legislations such as the Building and Other Construction Workers (BoCW) Act and Unorganised Workers Social Security Act introduced to enhance recognition and social security of informal workers, their implementation at the local level remains dismal. Furthermore, labour laws are built around a gendered conception of labour, which discounts the unpaid care work that women carry out in families and communities. Women workers end up 'doubly tied', subject to patriarchal power hierarchies in their homes and capitalistic exploitation in their workplaces. It is therefore essential to integrate the question of skill development of women construction workers with the larger ambit of guaranteeing their rights and entitlements.

Discussion and Recommendation IV:

Integrating Skill Development with Assertion of Labour and Women's Rights

The construction industry has been marked by the 'informalization of labour' with systems of contracting and sub-contracting. Furthermore, there has also been a 'feminization of labour' in the industry with women emerging as a cheap, flexible, and temporary workforce that largely falls outside the ambit of statutory provisions and regulations.

Studies report how employers exploit women by imposing lower wages and casual work arrangements on them. 98% of the female workforce in the construction industry are casual workers. Even though the Minimum Wages Act and Equal Wages Act and guarantees minimum wages and equal pay for equal work, women construction workers are almost invariably paid lesser than their male counterparts. The failure to provide adequate living and working conditions is another major issue. Even though the Building and other Construction Workers Act 1996 mandates that every place where building or other construction work is carried on, the employer shall provide sufficient latrine and urinal accommodation, this regulation is hardly followed. Studies have documented how women workers sometimes avoid drinking water so that they don't have to use latrine facilities which causes serious health complications. Further, while it is legally mandated that creche facilities be provided on construction sites, this is rarely followed. Children are often left behind in rural households, or brought to construction sites where they become unaccounted child labourers.

Given this existing condition of denial of rights and entitlements of women construction workers, it is necessary to integrate the program of skill development within the larger program of labour rights and social security. Skill training programs have to be accompanied with gender training and awareness building components so that women workers are given the knowledge and confidence

to collectivize and assert their demands with employers. It was often seen that the women workers themselves held patriarchal misconceptions about their own capabilities which prevented them from leveraging livelihood opportunities. Further, while there are many landmark laws such as the Building and other Construction Workers Act 1996, Inter-state Migrant Workers Act, Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, most women construction workers are unaware of these laws and the provisions they guarantee for improving their living and working condition. As it stands, the participation of women construction workers in worker union activities is minimal. Tackling these barriers will be fundamental to unlocking the developmental impacts of skilled training. As was seen in the case of the Karmika School of Construction Workers, the gender and legal training that the women received during the skill training programs allowed them to gain an identity of their own and collectively bargain for higher and equal wages with employers.

Integrating skill development with labour rights also refers to the reframing of the skilling as a legal right. Chattisgarh is the first state in India which has taken a step in this direction through its 'Right of Youth to Skill Development Act' passed in 2013, which makes it the liability of the state to equip any person between the age of 14 to 45 years with free professional skill training across different sectors to increase their employability and enhance their livelihoods. Such policies should be replicated especially in states like Haryana, Bihar, Jharkhand which have high rates of unemployment with specific focus on women workers.

The Challenge

The construction industry in India shows minimal investment in human resource development. This is partly due to the temporary, fragmented, and dynamic nature of the industry. However, this lack of industry involvement in skill development has resulted in a situation where there is a dire lack of skilled workers with mechanical and technological know-how who can drive the growth of the industry. The mismatch between skill demand and supply has resulted in depreciation in quality standards and cost efficiency in the construction industry. There is urgent need to activate the involvement of industry stakeholders in skill development of construction workers, especially that of women construction workers who constitute 35% of the industry workforce.

Discussion and Recommendation V:

Securing Buy-In of Private Sector Stakeholders Towards Promoting Gender Equality in Construction Industry

The Report of the Working Group on Construction for the 11th Five Year Plan states that the lack of skilled workers in the industry has resulted in 'slow progress of work, rampant time and cost overruns, low productivity and quality and eventually low value edition'. Most of the skilled workers in the industry have acquired their skills informally through traditional apprenticeship or on-the-job training with minimal support from the industry or state-led training institutions.

The lack of industry participation in skill development of workers has resulted in mismatch between skill demand and supply: on one hand there are high rates of unemployment among educated and trained youth, while on the other there is a lack of skilled workers in the industry. In this scenario, in order to achieve the goal of mainstreaming skilled women construction workers, it will be essential to secure the buy-in of industry stakeholders at various levels of the process hierarchy.

There are three main benefits that construction industry stakeholders can avail by skilling, hiring and creating women-friendly work environments is as follows. Firstly, with regulations such as the ESG reporting frameworks introduced by The Securities and Exchange Board of India and the legal mandate to dedicate 2% of company turnover for Corporate Social Responsibility activities, construction companies can no longer ignore social and environmental sustainability goals. Investing in skill development of women construction workers can result in multiple social good outcomes not limited to gender equality, poverty reduction and livelihood security.

Secondly, women workers who constitute 35% of the industry workforce, have so far been unable to realize their full economic and social potential. Unlocking the capabilities of this marginalized workforce will have far-reaching economic benefits for construction companies in terms of human resource productivity and efficiency. Further, by targeting women for

skilling in high demand and future-ready job roles, construction companies will be able to foster a workforce capable of driving the industry's progress towards more sustainable and more efficient technologies.

As it stands only a handful of construction companies such as Larsen and Toubro, ILFS Engineering Services, Tata Projects run skill development programs. Within these institutes there is hardly any participation of women. This situation has to change. Industry-led training institutes should devise community engagement initiatives for recruiting and mobilizing women trainees. Further, special attention has to be paid to dismantling patriarchal misconceptions of trainers, workers and employers. Additionally, handholding support has to be provided for placement to the women trainees along with creating women-friendly work environments through provision of basic services and child-care facilities at construction sites. Large construction companies and industry associations such as CREDAI, BAI, and CII have the know-how and resources required to initiate such practices and advocate for their adoption by other companies resulting in a far-reaching overhaul in the industry.

A good example of such an initiative is the Kushal training initiative which is spearheaded by the Pune Chapter of CREDAI in partnership with NSDC. The organisation regularly conducts on-site training programs for workers at construction sites through its member developers spread across 24 states and 156 city chapters. Since 2015, more than 50,000 workers have been upskilled in over 100 construction sites across 50 cities. The training is a mix of 'classroom' and on-the-job training' conducted at the construction sites itself for a period of about 4 weeks. These programs should be incorporated with a specific focus on women construction workers.

The Challenge

The state-led technical and vocational education system in India has been ineffective in supplying skilled workers to the construction industry. Most of the skilled workers in the industry have acquired their skills informally through traditional apprenticeship or on-the-job training with minimal support from formal training institutions. Furthermore, the participation of women in the vocational training system remains minimal especially with respect to engineering trades. In order to achieve the goal of creating a skilled workforce that drives the country's economic growth, it is essential that the vocation and technical education system revamp its modes of working to enhance the participation of women and to cater to the skill demands of burgeoning industries such as the construction and infrastructure sector.

Discussion and Recommendation VI:

Reforming Vocational and Technical Education Training System to Enhance Women's Participation in Skilled Construction Sector

An expert committee report for the National Skill Development Board remarked that 'there is no shying away from the fact that girls get the worst educational experience out of those available in the vocational sector.' Government data on the number of candidates trained under the Craftsmen Training Scheme in ITIs between 2018-2021 shows that women form a mere 13%. The government's flagship skill development program, the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana which includes short-term training and recognition of prior learning programs, has a better record with 42.8% of the total trainees being women. However closer analysis reveals that women are highly represented in sectors such as beauty and wellness and apparel, but their representation in high demand sectors such as construction is as low as 6%. This pattern of vocational education contributes to the already deep gender differences by adhering to popular stereotypes about work capacity of women.

In general, the efficiency of the formal vocational and training system to cater to the demands of the construction sector has been limited. Out of the 149 courses offered by ITIs only 11 relate to the construction industry and 13 in construction related courses such as power manufacturing, power, plumbing etc. As per 2021 statistics, 4,72, 812 students were trained in construction related job roles which only constitutes 13% of the demand (35 lakh trained and tested workers every year). Further, while schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, implemented by NSDC and 38 Sector Skill Councils, has been beneficial in increasing the avenues for short-term training, only 3.5% of those trained between 2016-20 were in the construction sector. In order to increase the participation of women in vocational training, especially in high demand sectors such as construction it is necessary to make community engagement an essential part of the functioning of training institutes. A recent study by EY on gender constraints in skill training

revealed that reluctance of family members and mis-information on ITIs were one of the main barriers for women's participation in skill training. To address this specific public awareness campaigns that spread the message that women are capable and suited for skilled jobs roles in the construction industry should be initiated. Additional funds have to earmarked by state and central skill development agencies for these programs, A key example in this direction is the Skill Sakhi program implemented by UNDP and Government of Maharashtra. The program fostered a network of young women community leaders in peri-urban villages who bridged the information gap on skill development, employment, and entrepreneurship for other women in their community.

Along with this it is necessary to reform training institutions into learning environments welcoming and suited for women. This will include measures such as facilitating safe transport options, accommodation facilities, child care facilities, conducting gender sensitization sessions, and providing mechanisms to report discrimination and harassment. These provisions should be made part of the grading and certification formats of training institutions. Special funds should be earmarked for training institutions who wish to upgrade their institutions into women friendly environments.

The most critical part of reforming training institutions is to forge partnerships with private industry for employment of skilled women workers. Employers cite reasons such as incapability of women to take on physical work, risk in ensuring women security, and lack of commitment towards job as reasons why they do prefer hiring women workers. These misconceptions need to be tackled. Regular interactions with industry leaders, professionals, and alumni should be made part of the training curriculum.

The Challenge

Women construction workers mostly come from marginalized groups such as scheduled castes and tribes and are driven into the construction industry due to unemployment, debt, and rural livelihood crises. Given this overlap and intersection of vulnerabilities, it is necessary to consider skill development in relation to wider challenges of rural and urban poverty, livelihood insecurity, and governance challenges. Approaching skill development in isolation is seen to show limited results. Women trainees remain unable to access skilled jobs due to persistent cultural barriers and patriarchal industry practices. For meaningful improvements in livelihoods of vulnerable women workers, it is necessary to develop beneficial cross-linkages between skill development and community development programs and target communities and not just individuals.

Discussion and Recommendation VII:

Triggering Impact at Scale through Convergence with Central and State Level Infrastructure and Community Development Programs

Multiple government policies— the National Policy on Skill Development 2009, the National Employment Policy 2008, the National Urban Housing and Habitat Policy, 2007— have reiterated the need to enhance access to skill development for women workers especially in non-traditional livelihoods. However, as per the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index 2022, India continues to score at the bottom five of 146 countries with respect to women’s economic participation and opportunities. Women workers are underpaid and unrecognized even as their invisible care continues to subsidize the economy. Given this context, it is essential to approach skill development as a vehicle to improve lives, and not just livelihoods of women.

Reframing skill development in this manner will require approaching it in consonance with wider interventions aimed towards tackling poverty, livelihood insecurity and governance challenges. This convergence will have two impacts. Firstly, it will ensure that beneficiaries receive the holistic support they, gaining not just skills but also the means and opportunities to access better jobs, better wages and more dignity. Secondly, it will facilitate the targeting of communities and not just of individuals. This expansion of focus can trigger wider shifts in cultural attitudes and practices and thereby guarantee more lasting gains towards gender equality.

Some of the major state-led programs for rural and urban development include Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Rural and Urban), Swachh Bharat Mission, Jal Jeevan Mission, Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation, and Smart Cities Mission.

There is much potential for integrating the component of skill development of women construction workers within these programs. For example, in rural areas, women workers should be given skill training to take on projects such as toilet construction, affordable housing construction, and local climate resilience infrastructure. In urban areas, women should be targeted for skill training in emergent job roles in areas such as climate resilient technologies, geospatial analysis and ICT. The major benefit of such a cross-linkage is that it will the gap between skill development and job placement which has persisted so far and limited the impact of skill development initiatives. Skill training of women workers can be oriented towards supplying a skilled workforce for the implementation of rural and urban development programs thereby guaranteeing job placement and employment. Women workers will be able to prove their competencies through public sector projects and subsequently gain recognition among private sector employers also.

Kudumbashree's Women Mason's Training program is a good example of the impact that such convergence between skill development and community development can bring about. The program was expanded into a state-level project partly driven by the need to supply skilled workers for the Kerala government's affordable housing scheme, the LIFE Mission. Women workers were given on-the-job training and subsequent placement in the construction of LIFE Mission houses in their respective Panchayats. This allowed for more efficient utilization of funds, improved beneficiary participation, and increased economic participation of women. Even after the completion of the LIFE Mission, the women construction groups began take on other MGNREGA projects such Asola tank construction, goat shed construction and local road construction. There was also an increase in the women's participation in local governance.

So far, it has largely been civil society organisations that have run focused skill development programs for women construction workers. These laudable initiatives however have only been able to reach a miniscule percentage of the women workers in the construction industry. The small scale of these programs has meant that they have been unable to shift the entrenched patriarchal misconceptions and practices in the construction industry. Convergence with state-led rural and urban development programs will expand the scale of the intervention and render further weight to the demand for access to higher productivity and higher skilled jobs for women construction workers.

Identification of Challenges and their Recommendations Summary

Challenge I:

Despite the increase in the number/ types of training avenues available to women construction workers in the skill development sector, they are denied jobs and do not receive equal pay. Skilling alone cannot guarantee better jobs and income.

Challenge II:

Lack of sustainability of women-led micro-enterprises due to lack of working capital, lack of access to machinery, insufficient training in project management, and opaque business practices.

Challenge III:

Mechanisation and automation of the construction industry will make manual labour intensive jobs, employing mainly women, obsolete.

Challenge IV:

Labour laws in the country have been built around the assumption of a 'standard employment relationship', and are built around a gendered conception of labour.

Recommendation I:

Reserve a Percentage of the Skilled Jobs in the Public Sector Construction Projects for Women Workers

Recommendation II:

Build A Support Ecosystem for Women-Led Micro-enterprises in the Construction Industry

Recommendation III:

Shifting focus to Higher Skilled and Higher Productivity Jobs in the Construction Industry

Recommendation IV:

Integrating Skill Development with Assertion of Labour and Women's Rights

Challenge V:

There is a lack of industry involvement in the skill development sector, especially that of women construction workers, due to the fragmented and dynamic nature of the industry.

Challenge VI:

Vocational and technical education system have been ineffective in supplying skilled workers to the construction industry, compounded with the minimal participation of women in such training systems.

Challenge VII:

The larger socio-economic and cultural standing of women in society, especially with the intersection of vulnerabilities, makes access to skill development an even harder challenge.

Recommendation V:

Securing Buy-In of Private Sector Stakeholders Towards Promoting Gender Equality in Construction Industry

Recommendation VI:

Reforming Vocational and Technical Education Training System to Enhance Women's Participation in Skilled Construction Sector

Recommendation VII:

Triggering Impact at Scale through Convergence with Central and State Level Infrastructure and Community Development Programs

Conclusion

The objective of this booklet was to examine the existing pilots undertaken towards enhancing access to skilled jobs for women construction workers and derive lessons for replicability and scaleability. The challenges faced by these organisations reveal that it is highly important to develop multi-sectoral partnerships between government, industry, worker collectives, and civil society stakeholders if skill development is to emerge as a pathway to empowerment for women construction workers.

The challenges and recommendations presented in this booklet were developed in conversation with the four organisations Archana Women Centre, Habitat for Humanity India, Kudumbashree and Mahila Housing Trust. They provide starting points to take the conversation regarding enhancing access to skilled jobs for women construction workers to various stakeholders in the construction industry, skill development ecosystem, urban and rural development ministries. The need of the hour is bold and innovative action over incremental and fragmented action. The cross-linkages between skill development of women construction workers, growth of the construction industry and empowerment of marginalized communities has to be acknowledged and leveraged. Going forward some are the targeted questions we seek to ask and answer:

- Which are some policy innovations through which training and placement of skilled women workers can be guaranteed? How can policy makers in labour and skill development ministries be influenced to adopt these policy decisions?
- How can industry stakeholders such as sub-contractors, contractors, builders, and developers be convinced to invest in the skill development of workers especially women workers?
- How do systems of informal training such as on-the-job training and traditional apprenticeships with family members or relatives function? Can these systems be influenced to train and place skilled women construction workers?

The living and working conditions of women construction workers in the country is dire. Wage discrimination, sexual exploitation, health problems, housing insecurity, lack of basic services, and to top it all, the denial of access to skilled jobs. We hope that this report in which we presented the insights and recommendations we have developed so far, will trigger your interest and passion to support us in this endeavor. Together, we can create a future in which a women's right to access skilled jobs in the construction industry is guaranteed.



Habitat Forum INHAF

403, P.D. Apartments, Pritamnagar, 10, Paldi,
Ellisbridge, Ahmedabad 380006

Website: www.inhaf.org

Email: kirtee@inhaf.org

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/habitatforum_inhaf/

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/HabitatForumIN>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/HF.Inhaf>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/habitat-forum-inhaf/>

Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/@INHAF>



Sehreeti Developmental Practices Foundation

J-6/1, DLF Phase 2, Gurgaon, Haryana 122002

Website: www.sehreeti.org

Email: sehreeti@gmail.com

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/sehreeti/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/sehreetionline/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/sehreeti1>

Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/@sehreetidevelopmentalpract8962>



AN ACTION-RESEARCH PROJECT LED BY

HABITAT FORUM INHAF

SEHREETI DEVELOPMENTAL
PRACTICES FOUNDATION

