

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **Suggestions**

Construction sector is the largest employer in India after agricultural labour in the unorganised sector, yet the women construction workers are not allowed to acquire skills and become masons. Women join as unskilled workers and remain unskilled till the end of their working life. Men, on the other hand, are trained and given an opportunity to up-grade their construction skills while working and become masons, supervisors and contractors. This study has revealed that the important reasons why women are not promoted as masons is the gender bias which men and women have, and women construction workers are not given an opportunity to be trained informally like men in the construction sector. This study has also analysed the methodology of training offered to men in the construction sector and proposed a methodology of training that would empower women construction workers in India to become masons because women are willing to become masons and men are willing to train them and give them opportunity to work with them as masons.

### **Problems Faced by Women Construction Workers**

The Socio demographic characteristics of construction workers show that women construction workers are from the deprived background. There are more widows, divorced, scheduled caste and only earning members of the family, whose income is very low among women construction workers. More than half of the women are illiterate and are forced by poverty to enter into the field of construction. These women are forced to do unskilled and hard manual work which does not give them the proper remuneration and there is no opportunity for promotion. These women have chosen construction mainly because it pays more than any other work. They are not allowed to grow. Exploitation of the poor,

down-trodden and destitute workers must be stopped. Empowerment of these women is the need of the hour.

The Socio demographic characteristics of contractors show that their educational level is low. There are a few engineering graduates. Most of them are diploma holders or have completed SSLC or HSC. The study shows that more than half of them have worked as supervisors before becoming contractors. Some of the contractors have progressed from being construction workers. There are very few professionals in this area. However there are no women contractors, which reveal that women do not outgrow their positions and never really progress in this profession to become supervisors or contractors. This trend has to change and the women workers can be given the charge of being supervisors after some years of work experience.

Women construction workers face harassment at home and work place. There is also gender discrimination in work, wages and promotion opportunities. Empowerment of women to the level of mason or supervisor will considerably reduce the work place harassment and there will be a proper representation at the contractor level so that the needs of the women are met. Facilities like drinking water, canteen, toilet and first aid are not provided in all the work places. There is legislation concerning providing basic facilities to the construction workers but it is not implemented. Steps must be taken to implement the legislation on gender discrimination and providing basic facilities on humanitarian grounds.

### **Exploitation of Women Construction Workers by Construction Sector**

Majority of women construction workers are forced by poverty to enter into construction. Most of the men construction workers are in the construction sector by their own choice or because many family members are in this job, whereas many women are

forced to enter this field by poverty and non-availability of any other job. Majority of the women agree that they face harassment at work. Women admit that they face harassment but are scared of admitting what type is prevalent in the workplace. They are exploited and have affairs with the masons and other workers. More women construction workers agree that contractors are arrogant at women at work while few men feel that they are abusive. Women construction workers are employed for less number of days in a month when compared to men.

Women construction workers are more aware about the unions than men but membership of women in union is less when compared to men. Majority of men have joined the union for welfare activities while majority of women have joined for pension. Union membership of women has to be encouraged. Women in the construction work are exploited to the maximum level according to the contractors. Gender inequality in the construction industry occurs because of segregated schools, gender stereotypes and unequal access to training, which helps the development of different wage rates for different jobs, lower pay for women and inequality in job promotion. This situation has to change.

Work in the construction sector pays well and access is easy when compared to other jobs which are open to people with little education. But the work is difficult and is not considered appropriate for women. So, many women work in construction and they also do other jobs. Domestic work is easy, but badly paid. Agricultural work is not available in urban areas. In order to start a business, women need some money to invest. So, many women out of dire necessity are pushed into construction, where they are exploited. So this trend of exploitation of the uneducated, underemployed and unemployed poor women must be put to an end.

### **Awareness of Construction Workers on Gender Discrimination**

Awareness of gender discrimination, as the reason for not being allowed to work as masons is very low among women construction workers. Women working in rural areas are more aware of gender discrimination or inequality among construction workers than women in urban areas. More women who work on daily basis are also more aware of this discrimination when compared to those who work in projects. Women who are literate are more aware than the illiterate.

Awareness levels among women construction workers have to be increased by means of programmes in the media like radio, TV and educating them about their rights. The awareness produced among women to become police personnel by the State Government and the establishment of many all women police stations has helped many women to take up job in the police department. Similarly women are moving up the corporate ladder and reaching top posts. Proper awareness, education and motivation and opportunity will help the women construction workers to move up the ladder and take up masonry work.

Men are more aware that gender discrimination is the reason for women not being allowed to work as masons than women. Even though they are aware about this fact, they do not take any effort to provide means for the women to develop and progress in the areas of construction. In construction, men consider women as competitors and do not allow them to progress. There is a potential competition for scarce positions in construction. When women have to compete with men for jobs, the market discriminates against them. This discrimination has to be removed by changing the mind set of men and educating them about the potential in women and the loss to the society when the potential and capabilities of women are under-utilised.

### **Gender Discrimination in Wages of Men and Women Construction Workers**

Gender has the greatest influence on the wages of the construction workers. Men construction workers have different job titles and are paid according to the designation. The wages of men depend on the job title and experience, whereas there is no varying designation for women and their wage does not depend on their experience.

Women have only one designation – *chithaal*. They enter into construction work as *chithaal* and remain the same throughout their life time. Women are paid less than men workers for the same work category. Thus there is discrimination in wages and also in promotions. This situation has to change. There is no move to implement the existing laws on equal remuneration for the same job or to make new ones covering the unorganised sector.

Equal remuneration has to be given to men and women, and women should be allowed to be trained and employed as masons. Government has to enforce the legislation of equal remuneration for equal work strictly and implement the same. Most of the women construction workers have expressed their desire to become masons to earn more. So the women construction workers, especially those from rural areas, literate and young, must be motivated to take up masonry work.

### **Barriers for Women Construction Workers becoming Masons**

Majority of men construction workers agree that the major barrier for women masons in construction sector is because they are not trained, women are scared of heights, the job is difficult, women have no motivation and women are not given opportunity. Women being scared of heights, difficulty of masonry job and no motivation reason, show the bias against women working as masons prevalent among men. This bias of men has to be changed.

Women climb up the scaffolding and work in multi-floor buildings with ease as *chitaals*. They have the same potential and the courage as men to do masonry work. The skilled work of a mason is less tiresome and easy once it is learned, when compared to carrying loads of bricks and sand on the head again and again, digging, breaking stones and other work of a *chitaal*. The potential and capability of the women have to be brought out and allowed to grow for the development of the individual, the family and finally the society.

Women are assigned to only routine, unskilled tasks, such as carrying loads, cleaning and sorting. Women find it difficult to break through many of the male dominated informal training and mentoring activities that occur on site. They will easily overcome the difficulties, such as men will not accept them, train them and employ them, and will become skilled masons if they are given an opportunity. So women must be motivated and allowed to work as masons, which will provide opportunities for them to move up the career and earn more.

### **Willingness of Women Construction Workers to be Trained as Masons**

Nearly half of the women construction workers are willing to be trained as masons. The younger generation, only earning members and rural women construction workers are willing to take up the challenges and be trained as masons. More than half of the women construction workers are willing to be trained on the job. A few are willing to be trained on off days and institutionally. There is need for institutional formal training for women construction workers. Infrastructure developers can pool resources and fund for training institutions. State government should come up with initiatives to impart training to workers. Industrial Training Institutes recognized by the Government must give three to six months

training for women masons and issue government recognised certificate for them to be employed in Government construction projects.

There should be targeted training for women, especially illiterate women and stipend should be given to the women trainees. Most of the workers are in this job out of necessity and need to be paid stipend for sustenance during training. Financial and technical support by the government should be given to vocational training schemes that target women.

### **Willingness of Women Construction Workers to Become Masons**

Many women working in rural areas, working on daily basis, coming from rural residence who are the only earning member with more family income, working under different contractors and are union members have tried masonry work, even though they are not given the job and the responsibility of masonry work. Women who are immigrants, working under different contractors, literates, from rural areas, union members and the young are willing to become masons. They are willing to undertake the job of leveling, laying bricks, plastering and brick work. These women who are willing to take up masonry work must be trained and certified to take up the job.

Since women are willing to become masons, women workers can be trained and certified. Preferential placements of certified skilled women workers in public housing and infrastructure projects can be given. Tax exemptions can be given to construction companies that hire certified skilled women workers. Government must bring legislation to make the appointment of women mason mandatory. Steps must be taken to educate the public and contractors to appoint them to remove this injustice to women. Women Welfare organisations and construction welfare unions must take up the challenge and work for women's rights. Steps must be taken to educate the public and contractors to appoint women

as masons, and pay minimum wages fixed by the government to women construction workers.

### **Willingness of Men Construction Workers and Contractors to Train and Employ Women as Masons**

Men working in urban area, who are on daily wages, who come to construction work because of unemployment and are forced by poverty, are willing to train women as masons and also employ them. Majority of contractors say that they will accept women masons and give them work. However due to the lack of proper legislation, reservation for women at work and work place incentives, women are not being trained and employed as masons. Steps have to be taken to encourage the men who are willing to train women and motivate them to train women and offer periodical training on the job.

Partnership of non government organisations and construction welfare unions with masons will advance this cause. Government has to support such efforts and make it mandatory for all registered contractors to employ a minimum number of trained women masons in their construction work.

### **Methodologies Identified to Empower Women Construction Workers in Tamil Nadu**

The present study has shown that there is gender discrimination, and disparity in wages and promotion opportunities between men and women in the construction sector. The study also shows that women have the competency, capability, potential ability, skills and work culture to become masons. Most of the women want to become masons and it has been found that some of them have already tried and are also already doing some of the tasks carried out by men masons, which shows that women have the potential to become masons. So steps can be taken to train and employ women for utilising their potential, which will

remove the gender discrimination in the construction sector. The study has shown that there are two ways by which the women construction workers could be empowered.

### ***Formal Training of Women Construction Workers***

This study shows that majority of women construction workers are willing to be trained as masons, and men masons are willing to train them and accept them to work with them as masons. So the skills of men masons must be used to empower women construction workers by formal training.

In Kerala, Mahatma Gandhi University offers a three month certificate training course for masons (Jacob 2008). Most of the workers trained in this course are women. After teaching them the basic theory of masonry, these workers are sent to local construction sites for practical training. Their incomes have increased by more than 300 per cent. Another example of empowerment of women construction workers is the Karmika School for Construction Workers: SEWA, *Ahmedabad*. More than 5,000 people were trained in three years (2003-2006) in SEWA. The impact of training was found in a survey of 193 trained women. They said that they had more working days, higher daily incomes by 10-50 rupees per day (80 per cent), increased skills, ability to do any type of work (45 per cent), better quality/more efficient work (18 per cent). Twenty five per cent of women were skilled in plastering and masonry, 20 per cent were hired as masons and 30 per cent as masonry assistants (Baruah, 2008).

Training and certification from a government recognised agency or university will be the first step to work for gender equality in construction sector. The success of the endeavour in Kerala and Ahmedabad shows that such effort can be taken in Tamil Nadu and implemented in government funded projects. This will lead to the removal of gender

discrimination among women construction workers and empower them. Training programmes for these women have to be organised, and women must be trained and certified by the government training institutes and educational institutions for masonry job.

The government recognised training institutes, universities and non-profit organisations must take steps to train women construction workers and give government recognised certificates. Legislation can be enacted to reserve 30 per cent of job in the construction sector for certified women masons and implement the minimum wages for women workers in construction sector.

Positive steps by the government, non-government organisations and construction welfare unions will enhance the appointment of women construction workers as masons. If some women are trained and employed as masons, they will become mentors to other women and encourage and train other women to do the job of masonry. Empowerment of women to the level of mason or supervisor will considerably reduce the gender discrimination and there will be a proper representation at the supervisor or contractor level so that the needs of the women will be met.

### ***Informal Training of Women Construction Workers***

This study has also revealed that contractors and masons do not conduct any formal training for men construction workers for masonry job in Tamil Nadu. The men construction workers join construction sector as unskilled workers in India and receive informal training and move up. But this type of informal training is not extended for women construction workers in construction sector because of the worldview of people, gender discrimination and the absence of motivation for women to learn informally.

This study has also shown that it takes about one year for men to get this practical training to become masons. The men trainees undergo this training without paying any fees because this training is informal and the men workers are paid while they get training from the masons. So it is proposed that women in this sector could also be encouraged to get practical informal training by working as assistants to the masons because this study has shown that they are capable and have skills to do masonry work. This study recommends two ways by which the informal training could be given to women construction workers in India.

**First**, the study of the union awareness and membership among the construction workers has shown that the masons who are members of construction sector unions must be motivated to offer informal training to women, and women who are union members are willing to become masons. So more women must be encouraged to become members of unions and informal training given through the support of the unions.

**Second**, it was found that many wives of the men construction workers work in this sector and so men construction workers could be encouraged to offer informal training to their wives which would fetch more income to their family. In many construction sites, the relatives of masons work as a team because they move to cities from rural areas as a group. So it is proposed that men masons in the team must take steps to train their wives, sisters and other relatives informally. Only informal training will ensure the women of wages and practical training. After they are trained, the trained women can work independently as masons, earn more wages and offer informal training to other women empowering many women in the construction sector.

## Conclusion

This study has revealed that women construction workers face gender discrimination at work, work sites and in wages and promotional opportunities. They carry out most of the work of men construction workers. But they are paid less. Equal pay for equal work is denied to the women construction workers. Even though they want to become masons, they are denied promotional opportunities. They are open for empowerment and progress in their job. So it is high time for the government and the contractors to take steps to remove the gender discrimination among the construction workers.

This study has analysed the reasons why women could be empowered and it has been found that women should be empowered because of their skills, good spending habits, capability, potential, and their aptitude to work sincerely. The study has also shown that women are willing to be trained and are already carrying out some of the tasks of masons. Men are willing to train women and give them opportunity to work along with them. So it is proposed that the methodology of offering informal training now practiced in construction sector to train men workers could be extended to train and empower women for masonry work in addition to the formal training in Tamil Nadu.

To implement this informal training it is proposed that union membership of women has to be increased and men union workers must be motivated to come forward to offer informal training to women. The male construction workers must also be motivated to give informal training to their wives and relatives. If some women are trained and employed as masons, they will in turn become mentors to other women and encourage and train other women to do the job of masonry.

Legislation could be enacted in India to make it mandatory for the contractors to offer informal training to women construction in government sites and employ a certain percentage of women masons in all sites. These positive steps will enhance the resource potential among women construction workers and empower them leading to the growth of the families and in the advancement of the nation. Making women's life better by providing promotion and better wages on par with men will improve their status in the family and society, increase resistance against exploitation, and would prove to be an affirmative action in women's empowerment.