

A Woman's Place?

A Look at a Masonry Training Programme for Women

The 5th of June marked a new beginning for 25 women in a village called Mohuda. For the first time in the State of Orissa these women courageously stepped forward to take part in a training programme designed to provide them with a means to earning their own income through masonry. In a society where women are restricted by many social taboos, it was a big departure for these women to venture into something that had traditionally been seen as 'men's domain'.

The programme initiated by Gram Vikas and sponsored by Small Industries Development Bank of India, Bhubaneswar (SIDBI) involved women ranging from 16 to 35 years of age, of which 8 are married and 16 are single. Only two have had any education and even then this is only up to 5th standard. Till this time these women have led very traditional lives. They worked in their homes and looked after their families, they married early and struggled to meet their families expenses by collecting firewood and bamboo from the forest or working in the paddy fields. This was acceptable work although by no means regular or reliable. This new concept of women training for a profession – a 'man's' profession at that, meant that the women were initially faced with criticism from both the men and women in their community. They were questioned about why they were doing 'men's work' and ridiculed with comments about how they were becoming 'mannish'! One woman left the training because this and pressure from her family, who did not feel that this type of work was acceptable for a woman, became too much. A second woman also left as she had she need to address at home.

The remaining 23 women resolved to stick together and ignore the criticism. Shashi Nahal who is a 30 year old mother of three (1 boy and 2 girls), stated that this was an issue that effected their livelihood. It was an opportunity to be able to provide a regular means of support for their families, so it was worth taking a little risk and withstanding the criticism. She and her family hoped that in time the community would understand that the security this opportunity provided was vital and therefore come to accept it. This resolve was rewarded as the women now say that they no longer receive criticism. It was very important to these women that their work was accepted, as each was struggling financial. Shashi for example stated that although her husband works, he does not contribute anything towards the family's management / expenses.

The training is structured so that the women learn skills ranging from brick laying to plastering, over a 12 month period. During the training they are paid Rs.40 per day, however they only receive Rs.35 in cash, (paid fortnightly). The remaining Rs 5 is put into a saving account and will be paid in a lump sum at the end of the training period.

The women said that previously when they did find work they would receive payment daily, but would also end up spending the money straight away. Now they have security, they know they have work each day and know exactly how much they will earn. This and the fact that they receive payments fortnightly rather than in small amounts daily, allows them to budget and put the money to much better use.

The women still have reservations as they feel that complete acceptance of what they are doing has not been reached. They feel that although they are accepted while carrying out this work at Gram Vikas, it would not feel the same in their village itself. It seems that although people in their village no longer criticise them, they are afraid that this would no longer be the case if they actually worked in the village in front of the men. They also feel that they will not have an opportunity to take up work outside their village if it requires them to be absent overnight, as this would not be acceptable to their families or the community.

The programme has begun to have a very positive impact on the women involved and has also reached to other members of their community. However it still has some way to go in ensuring its sustainability and its ability to positively impact on women's position in the community in a broader sense. Shashi Nahak said that the initial decision was the most difficult and now other women are also interested in getting involved in this type of work. These are women that would never have taken the initiative and volunteered to be the first, but have been given confidence, by seeing what Shashi and her friends have done.

The mindset of their community is changing, stereotypes have been challenged and progress is being made. Shashi said she would never have any problem with her two daughters wanting to take up work outside the home even that which may be thought of as untraditional for women, she also stated that in her village she feels women are starting to have a voice. Ultimately this sort of programme is more than training people's hands, it is also about training their minds and spirits. These 23 women are just the first in what Gram Vikas hopes will be an ongoing programme.