

CASE STUDY

Conducted under the Project

“Mutually reinforcing the role of women in habitat based livelihood services”

– Researching the Case of India

Jeevapoorna Women Masons Society (JEEWOMS)



Keywords – Masonry, Quality, Gender Equality

FACTS

Context

The Jeevapoorna Women Masons Society was started under the Socio Economic Unit Foundation (SEUF) in 1989 to meet the shortage of skilled masons for construction work in the Thrissur district of Kerala. Registered under the Central Act in 1995, the society trains and equips women to become skilled masons and construct houses.

Many women masons took up work in construction due to dire need, as their husbands were unsupportive or missing altogether. Most of them started as helpers to male masons. It was only when JEEWOMS intervened that women started getting training in masonry. They were initially trained in latrine construction, and slowly graduated to making cement blocks and house construction. Today, the demand for women masons in Kerala has increased considerably, as most of the male masons migrate to the Gulf countries.

Objectives

The main objectives of JEEWOMS are as follows,

- Create more opportunities for women
- Develop the skills of women as masons at par with men
- Build their capacities as trainers
- Provide them with a means to earn a sustainable livelihood

Scale

Over the years, 1,300 women have been trained in Thrissur district in cement block-making, pre-fabricated door and window frames, paving tiles and flowerpots. On the request of the Tamil Nadu government, some of these trained women went to Tsunami rehabilitation sites of Tamil Nadu to train the local women in those areas in house construction.

Initially, the work that the women were doing under JEEWOMS was allocated to the society by the panchayat and the government. The society in turn distributed the work amongst the women and they handled the work themselves. Some of the women today are independent and are now involved in private construction work as well. These women connect with the market themselves to get work. They bargain for raw materials in the market, and are aware about the market prices and quantities required. Further, the women under the society have also been involved in the work of Rural Sanitation Mart (RSM) in the state, due to their skills in constructing baby-and -women friendly toilets.

FEATURES

A. Innovative approaches

The major innovative approach of the society was the recognition of men and women as equals. They believed that if men can do masonry work, then so could the women. Initially they faced a number of obstacles, but over the years (at least in the areas where they have intervened) the women have achieved parity with men.

The society has also fought for equal pay for equal work in masonry, which they have consequently achieved. In fact, today, some women who were trained by the society also have men working under them, without major problems. If and when a problem does occur, the women have the confidence in dealing with the issues themselves. In this regard, it was reported that the

Socio-Economic Unit Foundation (SEUF)

The Socio Economic Unit Foundation (SEUF) is a non-governmental organisation (NGO), registered under the Travancore-Cochin Literary, Scientific and Charitable Societies Registration Act 1955 (No.491/95) in 1995. It was launched in 1988 with Dutch aid, to provide water supply and sanitation with people's participation. Construction of latrines in schools and for people below the poverty line was part of the programme, which was implemented in 16 panchayats. Other features of the programme included educating the people about the need for sanitation, and instilling a civic sense in them.



Mixing of the raw material for pavers

approach of the society in providing social training helped them tremendously. Thus, the provision of social training is another innovative approach.

Social training instils the necessary skills to deal with unavoidable circumstances at worksites. The training was especially useful in the beginning, as mentioned, when the male masons were creating trouble in the women's work. The society was attuned to the needs of these women, and one of the basic ones was 'confidence building'. A by-product of this need was the introduction of the *churidaar* and coat as the dress code for masonry work. With the *churidaar* (which is actually a *salwar* – loose fitting trouser and *kurta* – long top) with a coat over the *kurta*, the women were able to work effectively without any inhibitions. This indirectly had an effect on their confidence levels.



Window *choukhat* made by women workers

B. Skill development

The women in JEEWOMS are trained at two levels. The first is technical training on different kinds of masonry work, such as cement blocks, pre-fabricated door and window frames, and MCR and flooring tiles, along with actual construction work. The other level is the social and personal development training.

The basic criteria set by the society for the training are:

- i. women have to be married
- ii. under 45 years of age
- iii. from Below Poverty Line (BPL) families
- iv. their children, if any, should be more than 3 years of age
- v. women in need of extra income are preferred
- vi. previous experience as masons helpers

These criteria were set as many of the women were trained initially, but due to marriage and children could not continue. However, to mobilise women who met the criteria, efforts were still to be made by the society. They developed an application form, which was distributed at construction sites. Through these forms, they realised that some women may have the calibre to perform but cannot read and write. After talking to the women, the society made an exception in some cases. Most women were motivated to take up the training by exemplifying the benefits of skill development. The training was for 60 days out of which three days were reserved for social training.

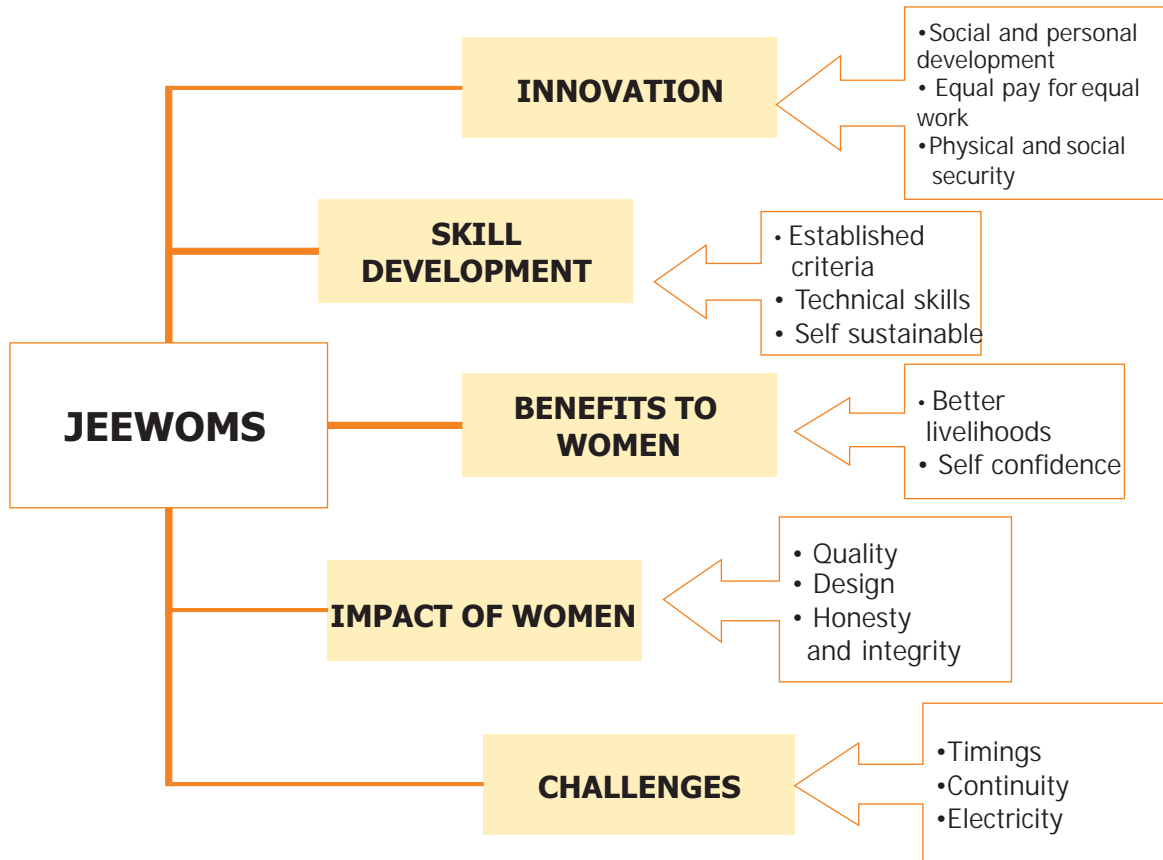
For the technical training, the women were provided with manuals, which contained data and instructions on diagrams and materials. This meant that the trained women had to have a basic level of education where they could at least read basic Malayalam. In the social training, the women were taught skills in negotiation, management, and team building. This training was thought to be important in building the confidence of the women and making them independent in their work.

Out of the women trained over the years, senior members of the group who cannot perform masonry work due to health problems and age are involved in managerial and financial work within the society. This helps in sustaining their livelihoods and maintaining their financial independence.

C. Social support

The society provides the women with a stipend as well as food and drinking water at the training sites. The women who were trained were encouraged to register for health insurance and identity cards, in which the institution aided them. For this, of course, the certificate of completion of training provided by the society proved useful. Acquiring credit on their own, without their husbands support also became easy, once the women had completed their training. While working outside of the JEEWOMS campus, the women connected with the village committees, to provide them with easily accessible toilet and water facilities near

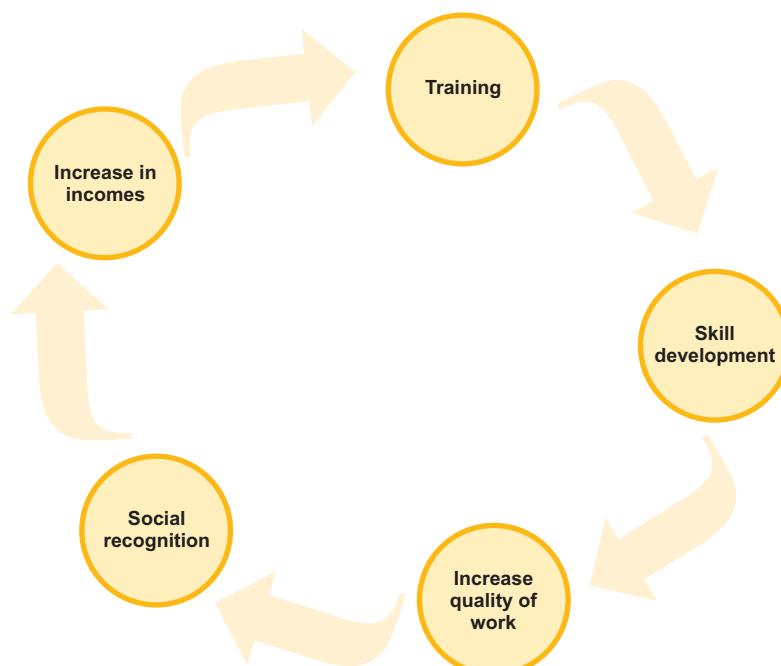
Diagram 1 – Thematic analysis of JEEWOMS



the houses. This was first done by the society for them, but later with growing levels of confidence, the women were themselves able to connect with the committees for the work. The quality of their work was also conducive in helping them in establishing such connections.

The safety and comfort of the women were given due consideration by the society. When working within the society, they were given gloves and boots. Moreover, the women were encouraged to wear churidaars

Diagram 2 - Cyclical representation of JEEWOMS intervention





Cement blocks made by women workers

(loose fitting trousers) while working, as doing masonry work in saris was cumbersome. In fact, the women helpers used to wear a lungi (open sarong) with a blouse to do the work, which made them very uncomfortable during work. With the introduction of the churidaar and coat by the society, they did not have to face uncomfortable situation and could work effectively.

D. Work environment

JEEWOMS centres were placed strategically in places where the women had easy access. This meant that they could commute to work easily on a daily basis by walking. Apart from the centre, women also worked in construction. Here, social security at the work place was given priority at the initial stages, especially since the men were not supportive of the women's work in masonry. However, the women at all stages would tackle these situations on their own to an extent, but if the situation would get out of hand, the society would intervene. In the initial stages, when women were working alongside men, strict instructions were given to the male masons regarding appropriate behaviour towards women at worksites. Some of the men were sensitised to gender issues to avoid major problems. Slowly this led to the situation that women were not facing any problems and could comfortably work at the construction sites.

BENEFITS TO LIVELIHOODS

An obvious benefit to the women through the work was that their incomes increased and that the women were receiving equal pay for equal work. A subsequent by-product of the increased incomes was the enhanced level of confidence. In fact, some of the women were able to fight for their rights without the intervention of the society. For example, if a man misbehaved with them, they stood against it. The women were thus independent, and could sustain themselves without the support of their husbands. This was especially significant in view of the fact that either these women were deserted by their husbands or their husbands were jobless and alcoholic.

Moreover, due to an increase in the income, the children of these women did not have to be forced into labour or work to sustain the households. The children were educated and some of them even went for higher education. All of these benefits were received mostly in view of the quality of the women's work, which led to societal recognition that the women were capable of doing work at par with the men. In fact, the women involved in the production work were claiming to make a profit of ₹ 4 to 5 lakhs per annum, which entitled them to bonuses at the end of the year.

The women also seemed to eat well while working. They would eat at home in the morning, and then have another breakfast at the site. After then they had lunch and tea in the evening before heading home at 5 p.m.

WOMEN'S CAPABILITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

At JEEWOMS, what is worth mentioning is that the women took up the challenge of working in a male-dominated area and were actually working at par with men. In fact, some of the women took up managerial positions at the construction sites due to their seniority and quality of work. These women handled the construction at the sites, guiding both men and women in construction activities, as well as

Rates of products

Bricks

Big: ₹ 20/ piece

Small: ₹ 10 / piece

Window frame

3 Sections: ₹ 2,300/ piece

2 sections: ₹ 1,400/ piece

1 section: ₹ 650/ piece

Door frame

Big: ₹ 600/ piece

Small: ₹ 550/ piece

Flower pot (One size)

₹ 60/ piece

OMNA

Omna, a 56-year-old woman has worked in the construction sector for 20 years. She was trained as a mason by JEEWOMS in the first batch of women trainees. During her time as a mason, she also worked on the designs of the houses she was constructing. For each house, a layout using ropes and sticks was set up. This layout was always technically accurate. When a house was being constructed for her family, naturally Omna made the layout. But, despite her experience, Omna's son questioned the technical accuracy of her layout. He brought in an engineer to assess it. The engineer on seeing the layout passed it as being technically sound. At the end, the house, much to the awe of her son, was made according to Omna's layout.



Floor tile made by women workers

managing any problems that arose.

Another observation worth mentioning is that the women's work was of higher quality. In fact, the products made by the women (such as the MCR tiles, pre-fabricated door and window frames and cement blocks) were priced higher than those made by men. The women claim that their products have a high demand due to the quality of their work. However, it was said that the women could not always meet the demand.

The head engineers who were working with the women in training and supervising them indicated that while the women take longer to learn than men, and are somewhat slower, they

did not have any of the bad habits that the men inherently acquire such as drinking and gambling leading to carelessness. The women on the other hand are punctual and always produce quality work.

Women through their 'pakka dealings' (reliable dealings) have been able to create a customer base (with the help of the quality, honesty, and punctuality of their work). Quality here means that there were no malpractices involved in the products made by them in terms of mixing of the materials, quality of the material etc. Due to these norms, the women were able to decide the rates of their products/services on their own.

Women have also contributed in filling up the gaps left by the men masons. A number of men in the Kerala region migrate to the Gulf for construction work resulting in gap in the labour force in Kerala. The women in the Thrissur district have risen up to this challenge and provided quality labour.

The women masons, when making rural houses contribute to the design process as well. The household women had full faith in these masons that they will be provided with decent sized and properly ventilated kitchen. The women masons would set up a small model with ropes and sticks to demonstrate the way the house would be planned. After the plan has been approved by the head engineers and the households, the construction work was started on ground. These plans always took into account the needs of the entire family, along with being aesthetically and technically accurate. In fact, in many of the kitchen designs the women masons have encouraged the construction of smokeless chulhas (cook stoves). These, they say not only prevent smoke and soot inside the kitchen, but were also good for the health of the women and the family.

In all, the women masons of JEEWOMS were confident employees who had made an impact in the society around them. These women always stood tall and were not afraid of taking on any challenge. Through their work, they had ensured quality, regularity, and honesty – characteristics even engineers find missing in men's work. Most of this is the manifestation of the dire need of the women to earn a better livelihood for her family. However, these characteristics can also find links with tradition; male workers till date consider themselves indispensable, but women do not. Women inherently realise that if their work is not above standards, they will be replaced fast.

Mani

Mani, abandoned by her husband, was forced to take up work as a male mason's helper 19 years ago. After two years of working as a helper, JEEWOMS came to one of the construction sites that were giving out application forms for literate women helpers to train as masons. Mani when offered a form, shrugged it off as she could hardly read or write, having studied only up to class 2. However, one of her peers recommended her name and JEEWOMS made an exception in Mani's case, training her as a mason in their first batch. This exception was the turning point in Mani's life.

Through JEEWOMS, she was trained in technical and social factors needed in masonry. This training helped her to come out of her shell. Mani started dreaming of becoming a great mason. Seventeen years since, she is may be the only woman contractors in the Thrissur area. Over the years, with the help of JEEWOMS she has travelled to other states to conduct several trainings for women in other southern states, especially during the 2008 Tsunami. She has even trained some foreigners in masonry. Mani has received a reward for her work from an agricultural university in Kerala.

Today, Mani works independently, despite having suffered a major setback in her health as she fell from a rooftop. This, she says is disappointing since she could still contribute a lot. Yet she is very proud of her work. Masonry, Mani believes, is not ordinary work. To do this you have to be physically, mentally, and socially strong – especially if you are a woman.

CHALLENGES AND RESPONSE

The society has some major challenges while training the women. Firstly, the women had to be convinced

that they could do the work that the men were doing. Secondly, coordinating with the timings of the women proved to be difficult. The women had many other responsibilities and coming to a consensus regarding the timings was a challenge. It is only after the training was over and the women started earning, that they adjusted to the new timing systems. During the training, the women were given a stipend to encourage them to work. Thirdly, in the initial stages, a number of trained women did not continue their work. This, however, was addressed by establishing a criterion for training.

Another challenge was in terms of the societal notions regarding women masons. Demonstrating that the women could do this work effectively was extremely difficult. In fact, initially any construction done by the women would be broken down by the male masons as they felt the women were encroaching on their work sphere. The women had to face a constant tirade of verbal abuse for a while. It is only after the people started seeing the quality of the women's work that they started to give them space.

Trade unions posed problems for the income generation activities of the women especially in the case of loading and unloading material. In Kerala, these activities come under the purview of the state trade union, and they are carried out by men. In the case of the making of the prefabricated cement block and MCR tiles, the women would not be allowed to load the trucks with the finished products, which could aid them in earning an extra income. In this situation, the society had to intervene and negotiate with the union, to enable the women to carry out this work.

Unresolved issues

A major issue that seems to be unresolved is the pride attached to the work. Although the women were happy to do the work and identified themselves with masonry, they do not want to involve their children in the same sector saying that the work is very difficult and that they want a better life for their children. Linked somewhat to this issue is the absence of young women at the society. Most of the women working with the society as masons seem to be involved in production of construction material and are in the age bracket of 35 plus, which means that mostly all have been involved with the society since the beginning. Younger women were missing in action, although trainings for Kudumsari's (women groups) and a Panchayat block had been conducted. The society is now aiming to involve some of these women full time at their production centres, to enable the continuity of these centres.

Another issue that seems to be unresolved in the production centres is the erratic electricity supply, causing major disturbances in production. It was also mentioned that acquiring material was troublesome as well. The cement for the blocks was easily available but the baby metal was a problem due to frequent strikes and shortages in the state. This did cause a gap between demand and supply. Despite this, the women were able to make close to 5,000 bricks in a month. However, due to the above-mentioned problems, the women were prevented from taking any advance orders, as they could never be sure of the material and electricity supply.



Finished packed product
made by women workers

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