



# MUTUALLY REINFORCING ROLE OF WOMEN IN HABITAT BASED LIVELIHOOD SERVICES

– *Researching the Case of India*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South Asian economies face many challenges. Amongst these, inequity in distribution of developmental attributes, specifically related to gender and rural-urban inequities, employment opportunities, inadequate basic education and technical capabilities to raise farm and non-farm productivity outcomes are crucial. Within India, the largest of the South Asian Nations, with a rapidly transforming rural population, development of adequate affordable and reliable infrastructure and services has emerged as a priority strategy for rural development and poverty alleviation. **Infrastructure development encompasses the habitat sector which includes housing, sanitation water services, roads, energy services and other social facilities.** These are being given impetus through many development programmes led by the government, pointing to a tremendous potential in the area of technology development and application in the sector. The construction sector is thus seen as an emerging viable option for livelihood creation and is seen as a poverty alleviation strategy for rural communities by Governments, Civil Society institutions and other development agencies.

The study on '**Mutually Reinforcing the Role of Women in Habitat Based Livelihood Services**' has concentrated on rural communities and addresses the hypothesis that “engagement of women in the development and delivery of habitat products and services can lead to tremendous benefits to both the women as well as the sector”. Under the broad rubric of Involvement and influence of women in innovation processes; the research has attempted to explore the benefit women had working in this sector and the value they brought to the sector in terms of design, development and delivery of habitat technologies and services.

**The two objectives of the study were:**

1. To seek out the areas where the gender specific dimensions provide an edge and therefore avenues to women to improve their socio-economic conditions – (*specifically incomes, social security, mobility and stature, control over resources, improvement in quality of life for themselves*)

and their families, self confidence due to acquired technicity) and ability to contribute to society or development processes outside of their realm of family.

2. To explore the evidence of or potential of contribution of women to technical design, technological enterprise design and delivery system design in the identified areas of habitat products and services delivery



Focus Group discussion with Women at the Barefoot College

The study started with an extensive literature review of similar studies of women's contribution in the construction sector in India and abroad. The literature survey disclosed that rural women (as skilled workers in habitat sector) are seen mainly working with organisations as paid employees and they are less seen as self employed women entrepreneurs. An extensive review was done of organisations working with rural women to teach them skills in habitat based livelihoods to select five case studies for in-depth analysis (These case studies have been compiled as separate documents for wider dissemination.). The literature review also aided in the construction of survey tools to research the situation across eight organisations in five states

of India (Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Bihar and Kerala) working with rural women in habitat services.

With regard to our research objectives a combination of methodologies was used. Individual interviews and focus group discussions were employed for the case studies. The data collected through the case studies added to the primary survey which was conducted across eight organisations in five states of India

#### Details of Organisations Covered Under the Study

Organisation	Location	Covered As
The Barefoot College	Tilonia, Rajasthan	Case Study, Primary Survey
Jeevapoorana Women Masons Society (JEEWOMS)	Thrissur, Kerala	Case Study, Primary Survey
SEWA Nirman	Patan and Kutch Districts, Gujarat	Case Study, Primary Survey
Darshna Mahila Kalyan Samiti	Bamari Village, Madhya Pradesh	Case Study, Primary Survey
Tilothu Mahila Mandal	Rohtas, Bihar	Case Study, Primary Survey
Udyamita Suvidha Kendra (USK)	Datia Madhya Pradesh	Primary Survey
Costford	Nalanchira, Kerela	Primary Survey
Archana Women Masons Society	Thellakom, Kerela	Primary Survey

The nature of the research is more qualitative in nature as rural women working as skilled workers in the sector are a relatively new phenomenon. Much of the data is based on opinions of the organisational personnel, the women workers, their family members, the consumers and other stakeholders such as *panchayat* leaders. Attempts have been made to quantify these opinions wherever possible to add weight to the findings and provide a future base of research work in the sector. These findings are described below in terms of the two major objectives of the research.



## MAIN FINDINGS

**OBJECTIVE 1: To seek out the areas where the gender specific dimensions provide an edge and therefore avenues to women to improve their socio-economic conditions – (specifically incomes, social security, mobility and stature, control over resources, improvement in quality of life for themselves and their families, self confidence due to acquired technicity) and ability to contribute to society or development processes outside of their realm of family.**

- Across organisations it was seen that working in the habitat sector and doing work that is traditionally thought to be part of the man's domain was empowering in most cases and provided a new means for income generation for women. However, the existing situation of the women in terms of empowerment varies according to cultural factors and geographic areas. What is common is that the women working or identified to work as 'skilled' labour in the habitat sector by the organisations are from impoverished socio-economically poor households. However, there were other kinds of work that are part of the habitat sector like solar energy which women from higher castes had taken up, as it did not require hard physical labour and could be done indoors, or in one location.
- The impact of women working in this sector (as skilled workers) is clearly visible on the lives of women. One was in the obvious terms of improvement of living standards (Both the family member and the women workers were unanimous in saying that their standards of living had gone up, and the maximum impact the increased income had was on the education of the children). But in intangible terms as well the findings from the women workers show that there was significant change especially in terms of *freedom of movement (94.7 percent) domestic responsibilities (69.3 percent), confidence in taking personal and familial decisions (76 percent) and decisions on children's education and marriage (89.3 percent and 81.3 percent respectively)*. Women however, still did not have much of *freedom in terms of spending money*.
- Deriving from a sense of pride and loyalty towards their work, along with their strong grounded nature, women are not interested in migrating once learning a higher order of skills. Unlike men, they tend to work within their local communities, contributing to local economic development. In fact in Kerala an analysis of the local situation indicated that, women masons have been able to bridge the gap left by the male masons who migrate to the gulf for construction work.
- The current role of women in movement and exposure related aspects like purchase and marketing activities is found to be limited though organization heads and other stakeholders clearly mentioned that women were found to be good in negotiation and bargaining skills. Women in none of the organizations were actively involved in these activities, however when the need arose they did rise up to the challenge in many instances. As one of the consumers said – *'Women can do any work that men can do, but they have to be pushed forward especially on selling, marketing and quality control aspects. And for this they need trainings.'*
- Connection with the market and the kind of response that the products get is also dependent on the roles that the women are able to play, where their full potential is evident. Some of these areas that have been elucidated through the study are:



Women at SEWA Nirman showcasing the Solar Lamps assembled by them



**JEEWOMS Women Masons at Work**

- a. Habitat Products: *MCR tiles, Flooring tiles, door & window frames, bricks etc* (50.9 percent)
- b. Repair and Maintenance: *especially in solar products and hand pump repairs* (21.4 percent)
- c. Water and Sanitation: *Women and baby friendly toilets, rain water harvesting structures, rejuvenation of old wells and other water bodies* (10.9 percent)
- d. Solar products: *like solar panels, solar lamp etc.*

Women's involvement is mostly relegated to product based work, and where they are working in terms of actual construction it is seen in the area of water and sanitation, which directly affects the women and indirectly the family. Organizations are of the opinion, and the data supports this fact that women can effectively contribute where they can work at a particular site day in and day out, which doesn't lead to a neglect of their household responsibilities. Hence their involvement in product based work is seen as beneficial. In terms of active construction activities, the value that women bring to work is more direct and tangible. Here example can be given of SEWA Nirman, where women's contribution to water

and sanitation projects is unmatched, as they had pointed out areas which were for the general good of the entire family, something that the men were unable to do, for instance, the size of toilet seats, the location of underground water collection tanks (rain water harvesting). Also, the numbers of women working in solar products were few, majorly seen in Barefoot College and some in SEWA Nirman but the potential that the women showed in this area was tremendous in terms of delivering high quality products.

- Women themselves need time to understand and realize that they can do better work than males otherwise the statement of empowerment from women themselves will get stuck at the expression that '*we can do work equivalent to men*'.
- Women workers expressed their concern for enhancing their education and training levels, as well as on getting regular work which indicates the extent to which the women are interested in the work. One woman from SEWA Nirman very aptly puts it – '*the exposure we are getting through this work helps us realize and fight for our rights. It makes us realize the skill and efficiency with which we can work*'.

**OBJECTIVE 2: to explore the evidence of or potential of contribution of women to technical design, technological enterprise design and delivery system design in the identified areas of habitat products and services delivery.**

- More women were seen involved in making of habitat based products as compared to the habitat based services. In both the instances whether it is habitat products or services they are seen to be confined to few products (like paver blocks, tiles, cement blocks etc.) and few services (like hand pump repair, roof rain water harvesting services etc.). They mostly work on instructions and guidance of the organizations and in very few cases like in SEWA Nirman, women are organised into groups and are supported to take business initiatives on their own, which too are on the basis of the hand-holding provided by the organisation.
- Regarding the quality of work of the women, the data indicated that despite the dependency of women on men, they score at par with them especially in terms of manufacture of products, masonry work and water and sanitation related work. Moreover, in terms of learning and taking up new skills women are said to be more eager (**69 percent**). In fact, 69 percent of the organisational personnel feel that women are good at making modifications to their products.



- Mostly women were able to add value where the habitat products were connected with the basic needs of the family and reduced drudgery. For instance the smokeless chulhas (cookstoves) were highly promoted by the women of JEEWOMS as it not only reduced the women's drudgery but also the adverse health effects on the women specifically and the family on the whole. Another example is of the women's work in rain water harvesting and sanitation facilities; they were able to suggest design changes that were beneficial for the



**Women from African Nations being trained to Assemble Solar Panels at Barefoot College**

entire family and not simply from the male perspective such as having the toilet bowl designed in a manner that it is safe for small children, as well as comfortable for women. In other words, it has been seen that the areas of the habitat sector of which the women can find value in terms of their own lives, are impacted most by their involvement.

- Women are effective conduits for transfer of knowledge, providing greater benefit to the society by and large with 93.8 percent of the organisational personnel being of this opinion. Value addition by the women was also seen in terms of the links they are able to establish with other women for training, selling marketing and so on. In training other women, they are more forthcoming than men. Women have been seen as being much more willing to share their knowledge and bring more women into the fold. They are able to effectively connect with women even when they do not understand the others language as seen in SEWA Nirman, JEEWOMS and Barefoot College. In fact in Barefoot College, the women Barefoot Solar Engineers were training women from African nations the technique of assembling solar panels so that they could go back and solar electrify their villages.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*The extent of the impact of women on the sector is more intangible and the few points that do come forth are that, women are more honest workers than men, they have an innate ability to pay attention to details and they are naturals at bargaining's and negotiations.*

Finally the study has concluded that it is too early to talk about the extent of the impact of women on the sector as this impact at the moment is more in intangible terms. There are some instances where the value that women bring to the sector can be seen visibly but their frequency is so low that inferences cannot be drawn at the moment. For the impact to be substantial and consistent in nature, the involvement of women in the sector has to be increased in a systematic manner – wherein more and more women are trained regularly and demand is created for the work that they are doing.



**Mason at the Darshna Mahila Kalyan Samiti making MCR tile**



Organizations have a major role to play in the whole process of bringing women forward to work, provide them opportunities through capacity building, providing good working conditions, but the problem arises when they either find limited market for the products made by these women or are not in a position to expand their work in terms of finance, space, resources, market etc. Moreover, the lack of governmental involvement (from the local to the national level) means a lack of awareness of the kind of work being done by them, and fluctuating demand due to non-availability of steady opportunities. Cultural and local societal restrictions on women's movement also cause a



**Women making Compressed Earth Blocks at the Tilothu Mahila Mandal**

major impediment to the growth of women in the sector. The capacity/potential of these women, thus, becomes entirely dependent (constrained) by the availability of work (in terms of job days) opportunities. This points towards an important question related to organizations role, its dimension, its scope (its limitations, problems) as it has a strong impact on women's work on ground.

In this regard the research came up with a number of recommendations based on the findings and the stakeholder workshop (which have also been compiled as a policy brief). Some of these are:

- In the context of rural India, women find themselves trapped within their gender identity and the roles ascribed to this identity. The need is to work around the challenges posed by the women's traditional roles while understanding them to aid them to move towards skilled work. Innovation in building capacities is often unlocked, when both genders are treated as equals. This is because both men and women can bring in their innate capabilities to the work, without being trapped in gender defined roles and competition. When mobilizing women for training, thus, the societal implications and gender stereotypes will have to be studied as well. It should include interacting with family members to gain trust, removing familial obstacles (in terms of time availability, sharing of household burdens etc.) in the training of their women.

- Organizations working in the sector need to realize the potential of the women in using their natural dexterity and attention to detail to work in the sector. Some organizations have aptly understood this and are including the women in renewable energy products and design processes. Moreover, with the low literacy levels of the women a hands on training process is helpful. This hands on process usually means that institutions spend time in teaching the women the habitat skills, but for long term replicability, building the basic literacy of the women is essential along with a ready and understandable manual,



**Women Masons at SEWA Nirman**



which not only takes care of the professional skills, but also interpersonal and bargaining skills. With continuous up-gradation of technology, in fact it is now necessary to introduce large-scale skill up-gradation for rural women workers to increase their competitiveness in the market. Thus standardization of training processes has become critical.

- Despite the fact that construction is one of the biggest employer in the country after agriculture, and women consist such a huge section of its unskilled labour force, no policy in the country encourages women to take up further training to upgrade their skills, pointing to a definite gap in awareness and lack of gender considerations in policy making. Unless at the very base, skill development in habitat services for women is included, their participation will always be informal and haphazard. Their training needs should be identified and recognized by the government, and the areas where their participation is beneficial should be included in skill development programmes. Moreover, it is essential that after trainings there are inbuilt systems for their infield training and ultimate absorption in the sector.
- Local enterprises should be encouraged and the government as well as NGOs should take appropriate steps to support and promote women entrepreneurs. The women to become self sustainable as entrepreneurs should be able to source their own raw materials and market their products, with initial hand holding. Support is thus needed throughout the process chain, starting from identification, capacity building, exposure, linking to appropriate organizations as part of networking and cross learning, providing market links and business opportunities.

In general to facilitate the increased contribution of the women, there is a need to set up supporting mechanisms (at the level of all the institutions) which are imbibed at the local and national policy levels. More efforts are needed to see that the policy to practice gap gets reduced (all through the value chain) and there are effective in-built mechanisms to monitor this at all levels.



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