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From Labourer to Master Mason: the Story of Gangaben Vaniya

Impact: *Women make up 51% in India of the workers in construction, yet are paid a small portion of what men are paid. The story of Gangaben Vaniya shows how women can overcome this structural barrier through training and support from organizations like SEWA Mahila Housing Trust.*

Gangaben Vaniya's early story is similar to those of many other poor women in urban India – surviving in the informal sector with limited education and skills. Yet, Gangaben has transcended many of the limitations of her environment with determination. She has worked hard, and today she is an independent contractor in the construction sector, a Master Mason, a notable Artisan and an employer.

Gangaben was born in Ahmedabad in 1967 and completed her education through the 9th Standard, after which she was married and became a housewife. Five years later, and with a four-year-old daughter, Gangaben chose to leave her marriage, and she returned to her mother's house. As her mother was a labourer in construction, she began her new career. In the beginning, she earned Rs 35 per day and stayed at this level for almost 10 years. She learned the craft of Master Artisan working with another Master Mason, but she continued to be paid at the rate of labourer.

In 1997, Gangaben learned of SEWA Union from her brother's wife, and she joined the organization. Through SEWA, Gangaben realized that her daily wages were inferior to men's and that she had the right to higher pay, especially as she had higher skills. For example, today, a male labourer can expect a daily wage of Rs 70-90 whereas a woman labourer would only get Rs 50-60. The Assistant Mason can get Rs 100-170 and a Master Mason over Rs 200. But women have often not been paid these higher rates, even for the work of Assistant and Master.

In this latter area of income opportunities in construction, it is important to recognize that 31 million Indians work in the industry, of which 51 per cent of them are women. In this male-dominated sector, women have traditionally been relegated to the lowest-paying, least skilled work. As the industry develops due to the impacts of globalization, there is a greater need for skilled and multi-skilled labour. And women have the skills and capacity to contribute to that technically superior environment.

Recognizing the importance of women getting access to same rates of pay and to positions which pay better, in 2000, SEWA's Mahila Housing Trust (MHT) began to train women to upgrade their skills in areas such as masonry, plaster, painting and tiling. In 2003, the Karmika School for Construction Workers was founded, and Gangaben began her first training programme. In the following year, she continued her learning process with the state-run Indian Technical Institute. These training sessions gave her the platform needed to begin earning as a Master Mason.

Gangaben earned the level of Master Mason (*Karigar*) in 2005, and she went on to become an independent contractor. For the last four years, she has continuously supported herself and her daughter with contracting work. Presently, she is finishing work to repair a housing complex in Judges Bungalow, a job that lasted five months. The project earned her a net profit (after daily wages of Rs 150) of Rs 18,000.

In addition to her work as a Master Mason, she knows tiling, floor-laying (for different material, including marble, kota stone, glazed tile), wall plastering, and china mosaics for flooring. She is also certified for site supervision, which led to her work as a contractor.

Following an initiative taken by Gangaben to convince a local businessman to give her his building contracts, she has now been working for eight years with Kishanbhai. In 2005, she supplemented her work and is also working with another contractor, Gauravbhai. With her contracting prowess, three women work continuously, earning Rs 180 per day as Assistants. She also uses male labourers for her jobs while she remains the supervisor.

In 2006, Mahila Housing Trust (MHT) began offering three-month training modules in numerous trades, including masonry, plumbing, carpentry, electric wiring, and welding. The training modules also offer technical skills such as constructing toilets, installing drainage and landscaping. Non-technical skills such as functional literacy (reading, writing, basic math and principles of physics and chemistry) and life skills (bargaining and negotiating with contractors, and conflict resolution) are as relevant as the technical



photo: SEWA

capacity in allowing women to successfully manage in the construction industry. Due to her leadership skills, her technical skills and her role-model capacity, Gangaben has been acting as an instructor at Karmika since 2005. She now earns Rs 250 a day for her training sessions, an amount that she negotiated for as it is above the salary of the other trainers. Gangaben works with MHT approximately half the year while simultaneously managing her contracting work.

In her role as contractor and trainer, she urges women to address Occupational Health and Safety concerns. She herself always wears salwar-kameez instead of a sari to avoid accidents, and she urges the women working for her to do the same. Unfortunately, if the women are working in their own neighborhoods, it is almost impossible to force

them to change out of a sari. She has also made the wearing of a helmet, gloves and safety belt mandatory for all of the people working under her.

Gangaben's contracting work has changed the way she looks at herself and the way others look at her. She has become a successful artisan in a male-dominated industry, earning the respect of peers and superiors alike. Gangaben has been separated from her husband for 17 years, and in that time, she has raised her daughter, who is now 21 and has an undergraduate degree in Commerce and a diploma in Nursing and IT.

One of the social impacts of Gangaben's success has been her ability to demonstrate to her family and community that a woman can manage a job and a family but that it requires that some of the traditional cultural limitations placed on women be reduced. Other impacts of her work are numerous. Through her work, three women have full employment, and she often employs 10-15 additional labourers. She builds their capacity while assuring their livelihood. Through her work at MHT, hundreds of women improve their livelihood situation.

Story prepared by:

*SEWA on the basis of information provided by Gangaben Vaniya
August 2011*