

Engendering Skill Training



THE ARCHANA MODEL
WOMEN EMPOWERMENT



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Women the work force

Women form a significant proportion of the work force in India. However, they are largely concentrated in the informal sector, engaged in vocations characterized by low earning, low productivity, poor working conditions and lack of social protection. They are considered secondary income earners and lower importance is given to training of girls for employment. The gender roles defined for women also expect them to primarily devote their time to household chores and child rearing, while time devoted to skill training and economic activities is conditional and limited. Training is the only tool, strategy, and means to effect individual and collective transformation towards gender equality by raising awareness and encouraging learning, knowledge-building and skills development. Empowerment of women refers to the process of providing power to women to stand up against the control of the others and help them to lead a prosperous and a successful life.

Women helpers at construction work hard, no dignity, no recognition

Archana Women Centre (AWC) believes in the actual empowerment of women physically, mentally, psychologically and spiritually through intellectual awareness and devolution of skills. While the mastery of these skills emancipates women from the clutches of societal servitude, the implementation of these skills empower them to strike at the roots of poverty and its consequent ills. The trainings imparted by AWC helps women to understand the role gender plays and to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for advancing gender equality in their daily lives and work. Training for gender equality is part and parcel of delivering the commitments to equal human rights for all.



T.G. Omana



C.R. Geetha

To know the Archana Model of Empowerment, we should hear the success story of two women, Omana and Geetha from the Thrissur District of Kerala. Omana & Geetha the two ordinary women from the Thrissur coastal belt hailing from very poor economic background had three and two children each to bring up, educate, and nurture up almost alone. Husbands of both are deceased. Both of them have carried out this task honorably well, not with the help of sympathizers, but through sheer hard work as “masons”. You might be curious to know how they became 'masons'!

Tradition and socialization ignited the attitudes about which jobs appropriate for men and which ones are appropriate for women. This may be one among many reasons to hold back women to take up the challenge to become a mason. But these two ladies took up the challenge when the Thrissur based initiative came forward to train women in masonry.

The transformation that those two ordinary women underwent during the process of self-empowerment and graduation as masons was however not without its problems either. They had to battle out and struggle with complexities. The hard ships to become proficient in the job multiplied with the reservations of the society in accepting and accommodating women as reliable masons. They mostly faced the sneer, ridicule and the destructive criticism. But they led a powerful battle to all these hurdles. They were constantly bestowed with confidence by JEEWOMS, the society of the trained women. The power and support to foray into a completely challenging, and daunting work as mason was provided by a small band of committed persons led by Ms.Thressiamma Mathew OMMI - a Gender expert and committed social activist.

Today, Geetha & Omana are proud leaders of two satisfied families, whose children could get a better education, care, and nutrition support during a very crucial stage of their growth and formation. And the life stories of their peers are no different from this substantially.



Ms. Thresiamma and her team of pioneers in Women Empowerment

Thresiamma Mathew, Pazhoor Kunnel, hailing from a Suburban Palai Village, is a different person, with a different outlook, interested in confronting the enslavement of moors and myths of the traditional society, which still comforts itself in marginalizing the women by denying their due and rightful space in the socio-economic, and cultural diaspora. May be though the unfathomable interplay of the cosmic force, Ms. Thresiamma got fascinated and drawn to a unique blend of committed Christians –OMMI (The Oblate Missionaries Mary Immaculate), who profess to lead an unselfish life, espousing the human values of freedom, fellowship, and mutuality, and who dedicate themselves to give effective witness to the Love of God, in the ordinary vicissitudes of lives, and not divorced from the pains, pangs, and struggles of common people.

With such a background, Ms Thresiamma progressed to become team member at a State run socio-economic programme of Water and Sanitation development in Thrissur. There she got in direct contact with the women in struggle, women exploited, women discriminated, and women abused in many ways, especially in the field of construction. Incidentally, this project for Water & Sanitation was supported by the Dutch Govt. The field of construction was an area, where the women were readily employed, as 'helpers' carrying head loads of sand, stone, mortar, and suffering the heat and rains of the day, with utterly poor or no facilities for health care, etc. The women used to be always at the

receiving end of their male masters, with no right to question or raise a voice of dissent. Despite putting in long hours of hard labour, they were getting paid less than 50% of what their male counterparts used to get. As the project staff, Thresiamma had to oversee the building of over 25000 low cost, 2 pit latrines in 2 districts of Kerala, and was appalled by the kind of discriminatory treatment, often of a very exploitative kind, being meted out to the poor, unlettered, and voiceless women. The repeating scenes of such exploitative marginalisation of women caused a sharp mental shock within; wondering how such remorseless and open violation of basic human rights can be condoned and compromised. Her loud musings with colleagues and later with the victims themselves caused an internal stir and paved the way for the starting of the famous women masonry project. In the beginning, it took all her skills of persuasion and motivation first to bring the very group of women undergoing silently the de facto subordination and denial of rights to realize that they can dismantle the fetters of marginalization that they can craft their own destiny that they can calibrate the nuances of a fulfilling life situation devoid of discrimination, if they would only take up the challenge of acquiring a skill – a skill that would advance their status and reward in the very field that they are now working.



After a series of talks and discussions, some 12 of them volunteered to try their hands. Simultaneously Thresiamma talked over to her authorities of Socio Economic Unit (SEU) foundation where she was working as Educator and managed to get their approval and support to take up the task of imparting training with stipend to a group of 12 women in the masonry skills.

A civil engineering expert and a master mason were roped in to provide the technical training based on a pre-drawn and detailed syllabus. Because the project work on construction of the Dutch aided water and sanitation project was going on under the SEU Kerala there was a readily available platform for giving practical training and employment to the trainee women. Thus, in the first phase the trainee women were given a thorough and detailed exposure to the technical and fundamentals of masonry along with a practical session in construction of foundation, basement, walls, level checks, plastering, flooring, toilet fixing two pit leach system, ferrocement water tank construction etc. A trajectory was thus drawn up though painstakingly for a collective 8 Engendering Skill Development march towards attainment of the visionary goal of equality and rights in the field of construction.

The first training lasted for 90 days, which was integrated with weekly social education programmes. The social education programme was woven into the skill development action in order to help the women trainees empower themselves psychologically. In the Kerala society women get relegated to the margins by a spin of complex cultural structures like tradition, patriarchy, religion, caste, taboos, and myths which together conspire to push back the women to the background and deny their rightful space in the society and economy.

The social education helped the women to identify the web of social dichotomies with their causes and to find their rightful space in the society by fighting the unjust and biased traditions. Thus was born the first group of women masons of Kerala, under the leadership of Thresiamma Mathew and with the wholehearted support of the water and sanitation mission of Netherlands and through the State sponsored SPV- Socio-Economic Unit.



Thrissur Mission & It's Growth

The women who were hitherto contented with the status of mere helpers at the construction sites were suddenly catapulted into the status of 'masons' capable of earning a higher wages all because of the 3 months long training that they underwent to acquire the masonry skills. The decentralized Panchayat system and the peoples representatives like Smt. Visalakshi Teacher of the Thrissur District Panchayat & Adv. Suresh President of Vilvettom Panchayat, lent considerable support to the fledgling group to find its moorings, gets work orders, and a basic centre to continue the training of new recruits. Thresiamma was able to start similar training programmes in Kalavoor, Alleppey, Kollam. in Kalavur, with the help of Cardinal Leger Foundation Canada Thresiamma could build another training center and train more than 300 women in various aspects of masonry. During a period of 10 years; altogether 2500 women from economically backward families were able to get trained as masons and make themselves eligible to work as full-fledged masons; and endowed with a respectable mastery over a very vital skill.



JEEWOMS

the first women masons company of Kerala

As the number of women getting themselves trained started increasing a need was felt to knit them together into an organic structure to lend them better coordination and feet to their efforts. A society was organized and registered with the women masons as constituents; and the senior mason Omana & Geetha became the President & Secretary respectively.

The Society was named Jeevapoorna Woman Masons's Society (JEEWOMS) which means “for an abundant life” and became the first women masons company of Kerala to develop masonry and other building skills among women.

With the financial support extended by the District Panchayat and a Holland based partner “Bilans” a centre for training and coordinating the woman masons was constructed at Peringavu, Thrissur. This three storied centre, with a total plinth area of 3000 sq.ft was fully constructed by the women masons of JEEWOMS, under the technical supervision of a civil engineer. This centre is a standing testimony to the prowess and tenacity of the women masons who strode the difficult path of training and skill acquisition to become capable craftspersons.



Today Thrissur centre is able to accommodate different training and production projects of JEEWOMS viz, concrete blocks production, pavement tile production, concrete door & window production, canteen, and other related self-help enterprises which together generate and provide full-time employment to 65 members of JEEWOMS. The self-employment created through the JEEWOMS make them entitled to get decent remuneration, P.F, Bonus, welfare packages, health insurance cover etc., which help them support family needs independently and without break.



The organized efforts of JEEWOMS, are coordinated and synchronized by Ms. Annie Joseph another member of the OMMI, whereas all decisions governing management are made by the elected Board of Jeewoms. It is a concrete and live example of the level of progress and development women can attain if appropriately supported with the skills, know-how and the social integration, necessary for a break out of the morass of trepidation and poverty.

The fairly long association of Thresiamma with the Dutch aided Water and Sanitation project helped her fan out with the new found vision to new vistas in Alleppey & Kollam: where similar projects could be successfully organized and many women from the poor families fortified with employable masonry skills. The coastal area which was conspicuous for its rudimentary sanitation facilities could provide immediate placement to neo trained lady masons as builders of 2 pit toilets, ferrocement water tanks etc. The training, skill application, and the willingness of the community to allot a pride of place to the lady masons helped in creating a tangible and positive change in the socio-economic



standard of the participant women. They gained in self-confidence as they actively participated in the decision making process and learnt to be tolerant of different ideas and approaches and to lead a life of mutual concern – one for all and all for one. Veritably, it was the dawn of a new era - an era of true justice, equal opportunities and immense possibilities of growth for a significant group of people who were hitherto marginalized or disregarded.

Helpers to Entrepreneurs a change of intense ramification



The Jeewoms trained women masons could create an impact through their display of versatile skills in the construction field. This helped them bag small and big orders for construction of low-cost houses, training & cultural centres, low cost toilets etc. helping them to gain a foothold in the construction industry. In the tsunami affected village of Alappad, the Jeewom women masons could construct 10 villas for rehabilitation of the Tsunami victims. One of the basic approaches anywhere the programme was being replicated was to precede the skill training with an analytical and empowering social training which helped establish a for 12 engendering skill development platform for collective action based on convictions and fortitude driven by idealism. In the post training phase, it helped them get themselves organized into a cohesive unit with inherent leadership and mentoring selected by the group. It was most conspicuous at Thrissur where a group of 65 trained women masons are participating in group entrepreneurship programme creating full-time jobs, considerable income, an assured post-retirement support and a very friendly work environment free of the discrimination and abuse of the male dominated conventional work sites.

The most telling impact has been the stellar role being played by women members with responsibility in deciding on the administrative affairs – wage pattern, benefits, pricing and sales, accounting etc.



From Thrissur to Kottayam An empirical Intervention for Gender Justice

That everything is possible for women, if the synergical force of 'skill & will' is infused channelized and unleashed has been a fact proven to the hilt at Thrissur, Alleppey and Kollam through the different training and construction projects conceived and implemented under the innovative and path-breaking approach of Thresiamma and Jeewoms. With the confidence and experience gained at Thrissur and Alleppey, Thresiamma shifted her centre of action to Kottayam in 2004 pitching her tent at Thellakam and Vettimukil – some 16 Km north off Kottayam townships. Here too, she had no difficulty in clubbing together the women from the low-income strata and imbining them with a genuine passion to

achieve growth and financial freedom, through skill development and employment upscaling. Like Jeewoms, Thresiamma succeeded in organizing a new organic platform at Kottayam viz, Archana Women Centre, to become an effective and capable centre for disseminating the concepts of growing relevance of gender issues, socio-economic parity, and the emerging trends in the development sector world- wide. At the AWC together with training in masonry, a group of 15 women were also selected to undergo 2 year long training programme in carpentry and the comprehensive plan to reach out to the needy women groups of the rural areas has been supported financially by a Luxembourg group viz Brederlich Delen.

This progress from the level of 'helpers' to self-help women entrepreneurs has been a strenuous affair fraught often with several intimidating and daunting challenges. The belittling attitude of the conventional male dominated construction sector, the physical limitations of women themselves, the frequent recurrence of internal bickering and conflicts, the failure to attract a continuous job contracts flow, the hindering influence of family and friends circles are but a few of the hurdles that this new empowerment scheme has had to address and find solutions. In a few instances, the trained women themselves backed out unable to cope up with the physically tasking demands of the job.

**DON'T TEACH US
HOW TO
DRESS
TEACH MEN
HOW TO
SEE**

Respect Women

The Archana Women Centre

It was in 2004 that Ms.Thresiamma and her band of three women associated decided to extent the project to Kottayam – the land of latex and an enterprising community. Thresiamma could attract a few talented and dedicated persons like Shaiby Kuruville, Civil Engineer, Aji Prince, Administrator, Jainamma Jigi, Ms. Theres, Jayasree and a few technical experts to continue the mission. Here too, the outlines of work was woven around the network of Panchayats, Local NGOs and women social workers who identified and motivated needy women from the economically backward sections willing to undergo the necessary training in masonry and carpentry. Because of the excitement and public interest generated by the new work culture many needy women come forward to undergo the trainings in masonry or carpentry.

During the period from 2004 till 2015, 23 groups of women numbering 750 have been successfully trained in both theoretical and practical aspects of masonry. Out of these, 150 women were selected and identified by the Government supported



Agency viz Kudumbashree. These women deputed by the Kudumbashree have been helped by them to enter into continued employment in different projects of Kudumbashree. After getting trained in the masonry skills, the women have been able to get a decent wages in the band of 700-800 almost at par with a skilled male mason.



Carpentry

Like the masonry training, a group of 15 women have been undergoing training in carpentry crafts. Experts from Netherlands and Belgium came down to give a state-of-the art training in various carpentry skills such as bamboo technology and its application in aesthetic construction designing and crafting various wooden articles using modern tools and equipments. The skill training enabled the trainee women to master such skills and capabilities which advanced their employment opportunities. The 7000 sq.ft. Training and animation centre of Archana at Vettimukil was built exclusively by the women who underwent training in masonry under the supervision of an engineering expert. Many more joined the training and established their on production in various places.

Workers to Owners - The Maso Carpe Welfare Society

a change replete with growth elements



A unique feature of the Archana intervention among the poor and unorganized women of Kottayam area, became important, being an organization of the trained women into self-supporting entrepreneur group with an objective of generating sustainable employment opportunities as well as a participating ownership of the enterprise. The 'Mesocarpe' (MC) Society was launched (A self-help Entrepreneurial Society) with this aim. This self-help forum of the trained women masons, and carpenters take up project activities for construction of residential houses and apartments. As in the instance of Jeewoms of Thrissur the decision making, planning and implementation of projects is carried out through the decisions made by the elected managing committee under the guiding and tempering mentorship of coordinator.



One of the important projects undertaken and successfully executed by the MC society is construction of villas in 3 different localities. The project which is progressing satisfactorily generates employment opportunities for the trained women masons with assurance of the benefits of a sustained employment viz, bonus, PF, health insurance, and post retirement pensions. The economic benefits of these pioneering and innovative steps in the direction of women empowerment through skill training are visible and quite encouraging. Most of the women masons single handedly look after their family with income of children education, elder's care and home renovations. Three of the women members have children undergoing B Tech courses, one has a medical aspirant and 3 in MBA, several others have their children undergoing graduation courses. 75% of them got their houses renovated and repaired, while 65 of them built new houses.

Reaching the grassroots for Better Governance and Development



One of the missions with which Thresiamma & Co., got identified with at the AWC was the need of a broader outreach to the community and the need to sensitize it about basic human rights the untapped reservoir of women potentials the need to cultivate a gender friendly culture devoid of the paranoid and skewed attitudes towards gender world justice etc. She set about accomplishing this task from the grassroots level by inviting the elected representatives of the village Panchayats for a training programme on the PRA model in leadership, planning and egalitarian development ethos.

There was a positive response and 350 such elected village leaders willingly participated in the training conducted in the year 2011 highlighted the basic parameters and ingredients essentially necessary to remedy the imbalances caused in gender spectrum by the forces of tradition, culture, and religion. This sensitization programme caused a new and visible shift in the planning, decision making and implementation of projects at Panchayat / Village levels providing enough space to the genuine gender needs and concerns.



Statewide Gender Campaign



One of the outstanding projects undertaken by the AWC team in year was the “Statewide Gender Campaign” for prevention of violence and discrimination against women & girls. The campaign lasted for over 3 months at a stretch, and covering all the important districts of Kerala, focusing

largely the young people in the campus, has had an electrifying effect as evidenced through the many number of responses received. A consensus was achieved that under the garb of global standards and indices, the Kerala Society still lagged far behind many others in conceding rightful place and space to the women issues especially in the arena of jobs, employment, and wages. It proved that unchallenged prevalence of this situation will only jeopardize the well being and future of every women led family.

Gender Resources Centre & Legal Aid



A perennial problem agitating all women activists is the lack of a reliable source of genuine support in times of need. Engendering Skill Development opened a fully equipped and functional Gender Resource Centre with provisions and facilities for counseling and legal aid for women who fall victims of domestic or other forms of violence, injustice, and abuses. This centre is a sure repose of real help with effective legal aid at hand. This is supported by the State women welfare Board.

Life Skill Education Programme



The educational philosophy in ancient India was one of guru-chela/shisya parampara and stressed on the teacher being responsible both for literacy/knowledge and personality development in the ward. However, education, which is currently prevalent in our country, is achievement oriented than child oriented. It does not address the needs of all the children who in spite of various levels of scholastic competence are capable of learning and need to develop those skills and become empowered to live effectively in this world. This empowerment is very essential in today's context as there is rapid globalization and urbanization with a breaking up of joint families and the traditional support systems. Academic stress, violence including bullying, sexual abuse, drug abuse, social divide are some of major issues which a youth has to contend with in this rapidly changing social scenario. An empowered child has the competence to cope with the challenges of life using the available resources even amidst such adversities.

Life Skill education is the one of ways to address this issue. The grass root level experience flamed AWC to step on to this mission. AWC organized Life skills education to the young and the women in collaboration with the NGO, Schools and Anganwadies of the area. Through the network of Anganwadis, the programme has reached far and wide and has succeeded in alerting the people on the many dangers hidden in the consumerist life styles. The project gave the opportunity to give practical training to the young in coping up with the challenges of child care, teenage care, public speaking, social analysis, historical awareness, politics and economic, financial literacy etc. and the need to develop new skills for successful integration with the digitalized global economy of the current world.

Happy, Healthy, Wealthy Project

AWC team has launched also a mass awareness generation and training programme to alert the housewives, mothers and working women about the emerging danger of 'lifestyle diseases' caused primarily due to overdependence on the markets for sourcing food and consumables and the increasing tendency to workless, and consume more.



Result & Rewards

Women who slowly bloomed in to their “Fullness” through the Archana model Empowerment are vocal when they share about their happiness and pride. Here are few who open up their heart:

Radhika Prakash, 40, is a full-fledged mason today thanks to her five year training under the aegis of the Archana Women's Centre. She used to earn a living as a harvest worker but that was seasonal work and hardly Lucrative. Today, she is completely involved in the construction of a multi-crore villa at pattithanam. She has built rainwater – harvest models, the wall of the Thellakom Centre, Vettimukal Centre and so on.

“Now I have a permanent job. I have learnt so many new things. And I feel great. The trip to New Delhi and the parliament visit are my favorite memories.” She learnt of AWC through a programme officer at Kumarakom.

Valsala, 46 is a ferro cement worker who has done kitchen shelves, Ferro cement tanks, waste rings, ferro-cement slabs and cupboards.

“Archana, to me, means love, courage and confidence The center was the answer to all my troubles and financial worries.” She has been with the Centre for seven years.

Both Radhika's and Valsala's husbands were initially hesitant to send their wives to construction sites, a largely male- dominated sector. But today, the women have their full confidence and they earn more than their husbands.

Omana Soman, 48 was trained by a professional bamboo worker from Holland at the AWC. She makes sofas, chairs, work sheds and is also trained in the treatment of bamboo. Formely a distributor of note – books to schools, today she is a full- time earning member of her household.

“Archana has given me economic and social power. I am a better person today. My self – confidence has surged by leaps and bounds!” She has also become a trainer for women.

Sindhu, 39 who graduated in TTC and also did a course in tailoring, today is a successful carpenter. She makes all types of furniture required for a complete home. “Women, are reluctant to enter this field because they also need to be educated, especially in arithmetic. It is crucial for taking the apt measurements. Sindhu, today, is an accomplished woman. The AWC has given her an identity that she can be proud of. As a divorcee, she had her limitations, but her new- found profession has erased the stigma considerably. “I am happier, more well –read and I have the courage to react to wrongdoing.

Shanty Babu, 38, too feels that her three- year stint with the AWC was a turning point in her life. “Though I am a widow, I am much more appreciated now that I am earning a steady income through making hollow bricks. I can take care of my children's education now.” This movement aimed at carving out a gender sensitive society at best is a contrarian approach. To defy and to dismantle the forces and tyranny of centuries old, practices and prejudices and reinforced by a complex systems, praxis, taboos, and beliefs, is no easy task. It becomes at times frustrating and disappointing, when even our bona fides stand challenged at the altar of the very community that is expected to be delivered of a exploiting environment and the forces of oppression are always keenly following to disprove the gender point that this team of Ms.Thresiamma was trying to make and validate. To compromise with the powers of status quo is easier; but Ms.Thresiamma has displayed a very rare character of courage, conviction, and vision to unleash and release the huge potentials and possibilities of women power to take on the powers of divisions and discriminations. Wherever, courage and conviction can combine with the proven strategy of skill development the gender cause can taste the flavour of equality of opportunities and justice. We have learnt the hard lesson that wherever, women have clung steadfastly to the

positive motto of “all for one and one for all” through the organic edifice of group action, no forces, of whatsoever kind, can break their solidarity and growth. There have been pitfalls and problems in this pioneering initiative to carve out a new world of opportunity and equality for the poor women. Their inherent physical limitations, the tendency of internal bickering and the hostile social milieu have been some of the hindering factors to the growth of this initiative. Such issues are best tackled and solved through the edifice of an organized structure, and a dedicated leadership; that should be flexible, an open to the resurgent world and its challenges. For the women of the unorganized sector – which has been Ms.Thresiamma's forte-this seems to be the only panacea available to rid it of the ills of poverty and deprivations; and the dawn of a new horizon of equality and true justice can not but be nearer than ever.

25 years ago, when the first fledgling steps were being made, the pioneers had only one vision—to improve the employability of women discriminated and exploited at work places, so that they can earn better, and lead a happy healthy life. Looking back, this vision seems to have more or less been realized. Those women who displayed the tenacity to fight many odds and undergo the pains of a hard skill training, today stand vindicated and proven right. They are economically well off; and are self-reliant. However, with them, times also have changed. The nation has had a sea change during this phase, with a new globalised and digitalized economic order taking over the old dispensation. Importance of upscaling skills, talents, and aptitudes has gained prominence more than ever. This scenario also calls for a response of calibrated kind, with inputs of a broader and multifaceted nature. The Archana experiment is being tailored to suit the changing needs of the times and hopefully its projects and programmes will dovetail with the resurgent trends as well.

Towards the fullness of life for all





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