

Spotlight

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ALL HAIL WOMEN

The earliest mention of Women's Day, which is celebrated around the world on March 8 every year, can be traced back to 1909 in the US when the Socialist Party of America designated the day in honour of the 1908 garment workers' strike in New York, where women protested against the poor working conditions

ISHA ARORA

AS PER THE International Labour Organisation's 2018 report titled *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture* (third edition), around 81% of employed people in India are working in the informal sector. Informalisation of labour, in fact, is the highest in India and Nepal (at 90.7%) followed by Pakistan (77.6%). What's most significant, though, is the finding that around 82% of the total women in India are working in the informal sector.

At a time when India is battling its worst employment woes—with unemployment at a 45-year high (at 6.1%), as per reports—it is heartening to see women taking up roles and jobs in the informal sector that society considers fit only for men. Employment in the informal sector is, however, devoid of any binding rules or regulations, leaving greater room for exploitation and discrimination. And this makes the issue of recognition of women in offbeat informal jobs all the more important.

Thankfully, many organisations in India have recognised this need and are working actively towards making non-traditional jobs in the informal sector welcoming for women. One of these is Azad Foundation, a New Delhi-based non-government organisation, which is working towards empowering resource-poor women by providing them with knowledge and skills to make them employable. The NGO has training centres across the country where women are given training in driving, vehicle repair,

construction work, etc. "If you are swimming against the stream, your bones and muscles automatically get stronger. Therefore, we are looking at providing training to women in non-traditional livelihoods so they get a chance to shine," says Shrinivas Rao, chief operating officer, Azad Foundation, which recently organised a conference, 'Making Non-Traditional Livelihoods Work for the Marginalised', in the national capital where women from across the globe employed in the informal economy came together to share their stories.

Experts in the subject, working in multinational corporations and research centres, were also part of the event to engage in dialogue with respect to empowering women in non-traditional jobs. Wenny Kusuma, a Nepal-based UN Women representative, was one of them—the UN has been actively engaged in dialogue with respect to non-traditional jobs across the globe and is looking at devising strategies and policies for better recognition of such roles. Kusuma herself has more than 30 years' experience in the field of women's human rights and gender equality with a focus on women, peace and security in conflict and post-conflict settings. "There is the problem of invisibility. If women are invisible, they would not be considered in recruitment programmes, etc. We need to ask if every step is a step towards inclusivity," said Kusuma at the conference, acknowledging that it's getting difficult for women to make a mark for themselves even in mainstream jobs in current times.

Hence, finding a place in non-traditional jobs is certainly a challenge, more so because women end up dropping out of the workforce for a plethora of reasons. "Before we address the topic of women dropping out of the workforce, we have to acknowledge the question of retention. What are we on our part doing to retain women? Are we offering them enough services to continue being employed? If we are not providing childcare services, for instance, women are bound to drop out. The burden of care has been borne by women and we truly need to address that," she added.

Subhalakshmi Nandi, deputy regional director-Asia at the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), was also one of the experts at the conference—the ICRW is actively involved in research work with respect to the role of marginalised women in non-traditional jobs. "There are various perspectives on the marginalised. One of the assumptions is that men and women are not equal, and even within women, not all are equal... so 'women', perse, is not a homogenous community," she said, adding that we need better recognition of women in non-traditional jobs to attain the larger goal of gender equality. "Globally, women are doing 2.5 times more unpaid work than men, but in India, that figure is six times more... There is something about the 6,000-year-old patriarchy system that 70 years of democracy have not helped change," she said.

Helping bring that much-needed change are not just

organisations like the ICRW and UN. Some startups, too, have come up in recent times with the aim of empowering marginalised women. Take, for instance, New Delhi-based Sakha Consulting Wings, which, in partnership with Azad Foundation, provides training to women to become professional drivers and later offers them employment opportunities as well.

Then there is Koala Kabs, which provides its women drivers training in soft skills and stress management to help them cope with the pressures of the job better. The venture was founded by New Delhi-based Shailja Mittal in 2017 after she faced safety issues and concerns with her daughter riding with unknown drivers. She started the company with just women drivers onboard, so that mothers like her didn't have to feel afraid of sending their daughters with unknown male drivers. "The women employed with Koala Kabs start early and reach their homes by 5.30 pm, so they have ample time to spend at home," says Mittal, adding that their women drivers earn a minimum of ₹15,000-₹20,000 per month, with the option of flexible work hours. Going ahead, Mittal plans to expand the fleet of cars to 75 from the current 15, with at least 100 women drivers onboard (currently, there are 15 full-time drivers).

Clearly, the informal economy has no dearth of employment opportunities for women, if only they are given a chance to train and grow. Here, we profile five women who participated in the Azad Foundation conference in New Delhi and who have chosen employment in the non-traditional informal sector and are making a success of it...

WOMEN AT WORK

Ahead of International Women's Day, we bring you stories of women who have made a success of themselves despite all odds—fighting financial constraints, societal pressures and taking up offbeat jobs not normally associated with the gender

ANITA VARMA, 25, DRIVER

A fresh start

This mother of two left her abusive husband, finding financial independence in working as a driver

TWENTY-FIVE-YEAR-OLD Anita Varma's fate was sealed the moment she was born. Coming from a lower-caste family of limited means in Indore, she was educated till class X after which her parents married her off to a daily-wage labourer when she was just 16 years old. In the ensuing years, Varma had two children, even as she endured domestic violence at the hands of her alcoholic husband. "My husband used to beat me and whatever little he earned was spent on alcohol. He didn't give me a penny," rues Varma.

Around a year and a half ago, when she had had enough, she ventured out of her home and enlisted with Indore-based NGO Samaan Social Development Society, which provides training to unemployed women as part of its mission to make women financially independent. Varma underwent eight months of rigorous training to become a professional car driver. "People told me I should learn parlour work or stitching, but I thought most women do those kinds of jobs... I also figured that if I drive, I will get to travel everywhere and meet different types of people with different stories and get better exposure in the process," she says.

Some months of experience and two jobs later, Varma now gets paid ₹8,500 a month for 10 hours of work everyday as a personal driver. Besides driving, Varma can change tyres and fix engine issues as well. Financial independence also allowed her to leave her abusive husband and start life afresh with her children by herself. "I never knew how to talk to people, didn't know how the law worked, all of which I learnt while getting trained," she says, adding, "I also learnt to differentiate between right and wrong, and was able to stand up to my abusive husband because of the confidence my job gave me."



PALLABI CHAKRABORTY, 26, DRIVER

Breaking gender barriers

In a society still averse to the transgender community, this 26-year-old remains true to herself

KOLKATA-BASED Pallabi Chakraborty, a transgender who works as a personal driver, was born as a boy in a lower-middle-class family in a village near the city, but always felt like a girl. While the realisation of being 'different' dawned upon her when she was just seven, acceptance from family took a long time coming. Talking about her growing up years, which were marred with physical violence, mental torture and even suicide attempts by her, the 26-year-old says, "My parents used to hit me, torture me mentally... They were even considering admitting me to a mental health institute, saying I was crazy."

All this, however, didn't stop her from dreaming and working towards a secure future. After her family withdrew financial support following her graduation,



Chakraborty relied on the money she earned by tutoring kindergarten children. She also got in touch with some NGOs that directed her to Kolkata-based Azad Foundation's training centre in 2017. "I was impressed with the fact that they were looking to train women. Since I consider myself a woman, I thought of giving it a shot," she says. "After eight months of training (in driving), I became financially independent," says Chakraborty whose family has now finally made peace with her identity.

Even after completion of her training, however, it took her around five months to get employed, she says, as many people refused to employ her—a five-star hotel in Kolkata, for one, refused to even interview her. Everything fell into place a few months ago, however, when a professor hired her as a full-time driver. Her basic pay is ₹7,000 per month. "I'm happy that I didn't leave my family to live with the transgender community... Also didn't resort to begging or sex work that most transgender people are forced to do... I made a name for myself by staying in the mainstream," she says.



ELIZABETH NJOKI, 42, PUBLIC TRANSPORT ATTENDANT

Passion & resilience

Even while battling inequality at work, this Kenyan national hopes to turn the tide in her favour

ELIZABETH NJOKI, WHO was flown down from Kenya by Azad Foundation for its conference, narrated her story of working in the Kenyan transportation industry for over a decade. The 42-year-old says her only mission is to turn the tide in her favour and become capable of giving her children the life she had always hoped for.

Before joining the Kenyan public transportation sector more than 10 years ago, Nairobi-based Njoki tried several different professions, but none worked out. "I joined the public transportation industry out of passion and for the lucrative pay it offers," she says. "Also, getting into a unique job is easier, as everybody is not competing for it. I joined as a conductor and got promoted to a stage attendant after three years. I am now in my eighth



JAMANA SAGORE, 30, VEHICLE MECHANIC

Search for self

The desire to do something distinct led this 30-year-old to enroll for training in two-wheeler servicing

DRIVEN BY POVERTY, Indore-based Jamana Sagore could have taken up any profession, but she chose to be a two-wheeler mechanic, as she wanted to do something different and make a mark in a male-dominated field. "My husband works as a painter, but he doesn't get work all year round, which is why I had to step out of the home a few years back to get employment and earn a better living for us and our daughter," the 30-year-old says.

Initially, she did a few odd jobs, but was dissatisfied with the quality of work and pay. Her quest to find something better that could aid her dream of standing out led her to the NGO, Samaan Social Development Society, where she is currently undergoing training as a two-wheeler mechanic. "Initially I faced a lot of backlash at home... my husband also told me that the work will be very difficult for me to handle, but I was sure about it. Also, people always say that women are on a par with men in every aspect of life, then why leave this work alone?" says Sagore, who has been training for almost four months now to gain proficiency in two-wheeler servicing, engine work, etc.

Sagore got married at the age of 19 and despite being educated only till class X due to financial constraints at home is hopeful of finding gainful employment at the end of her six-month training period. The friendly work environment at the training centre has encouraged her to strive harder to perform. "Around 65-70 women are getting trained to be mechanics... our instructor is very kind and patient. We are never stopped from trying anything new... I feel extremely lucky to have landed here," she says.

FATIMA WELHAM, 63, CONSTRUCTION WORKER & TRAINER

Stopping at nothing

A woman who took up the job of a mason in a bid to push the boundaries

WHILE MOST WOMEN take up offbeat jobs driven by their circumstances, Brazil's Fatima Welham—who was invited by Azad Foundation for its conference—took up the job of a mason in 2008 in a bid to push the boundaries. In the process, she also became the first woman at her construction company to provide training to others.

It all started at the age of 46 when



Porto Alegre-based Fatima Welham (left)

she was laid off after 27 years of serving at a government company. Porto Alegre-based Welham could well have chosen to live the retired life, but she decided to turn her hobby for repair work and wall painting into full-time employment. "My previous job was very regular... where no thrill was involved. After I got fired, I tried my hand at knitting, cooking, baking, but didn't like any of it," recalls the 63-year-old, adding, "I always used to like doing repair work, painting walls, etc. So in 2008, when I saw that an organisation called Women in Construction was offering training, I signed up." Post her training, Welham

started working with Women in Construction as a mason, building and repairing houses and later switched to full-time painting work.

The thrill of painting a wall or constructing a building is unmatched by any, says Welham, who has been employed in the sector for over 10 years now. Talking about becoming the first woman in her company to provide training to others in construction work, she says, "Till 2016, there were just men giving training because women aren't looked at as being gifted with such skills. So we protested and I became the first woman to give training to other people."