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Earthquake Reconstruction: Building Back Better

Source: Kriti Bhujju

WOMEN MASONS AND CARPENTERS: BREAKING SOCIAL STEREOTYPES

Following Nepal's devastating earthquake of 2015, there was a huge need for skilled construction workers who could build earthquake-resilient homes. Various development agencies supported training programmes to this effect. Building on the lessons of its long-standing Employment Fund project, Helvetas developed a 50-day course on skills for reconstruction - working in collaboration with the relevant government agencies and local service providers (training institutions). It was this course that eventually became the national norm, endorsed by the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA). A core feature of the 50-day course is that trainees are organized into batches of 10, further divided into two groups. Each group of five individuals builds a house under careful supervision - thus learning by doing. A system of results-based payment is used, meaning that the institution providing the training is only paid the full amount if the trained individual is in gainful employment six months after course completion. To encourage the participation of women, a mandatory 30% quota was set. Overall, the training programme has achieved its objectives. Most trainees – both women and men - completed the course successfully. Six months later, there were starker gender differences. A lower percentage of the women than the men were in gainful employment, and the women were generally earning less. This briefing note explores why, and highlights the lessons learned.



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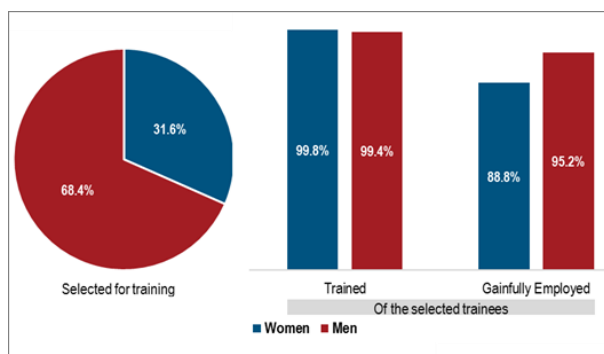
Why women in construction?

As in most parts of the world, the construction sector in Nepal is dominated by men. However, this is changing – especially regarding unskilled labour, in which women from disadvantaged backgrounds are often engaged. Given the high rate of male labour migration abroad, women are often left to fill the gap in unskilled local labour demands, whilst skilled labour is often brought in from India. The wages for unskilled labour are poor, and the work is back-breaking. Those who have a skill such as masonry or carpentry can gain a better income in a more dignified manner, although skilled construction work is still largely the preserve of men. Whilst the 2015 earthquake created a relatively short-term increase in overall labour demands for reconstruction, local skills and experience in earthquake-resilient construction are likely to remain in demand long into the future.

What the figures show

Training in earthquake resilient construction skills, using the 50-day model, was undertaken by Helvetas with financial support from two development agencies. The Humanitarian Division of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDC supported training in the (then) districts of Dhading, Dolakha, Gorkha, Okhaldhunga, Ramechhap and Sindhupalchok; the British Department of International Development, DFID supported training in the (then) districts of Kavrepalanchok, Makawanpur, Okhaldhunga, Rasuwa and Sindhuli. In total, 10,641 individuals were trained over the course of two and a half years, 2,995 of them women, and 7,646 men.

Total individuals trained mid 2015 – end 2017



Six months after training, 89% of the women were in gainful employment compared with 95% of the men. Furthermore, the women were earning a monthly average of NRs 12,566 (approx. US \$ 122 at exchange rates of the time) whilst the men were earning on average NRs 14,135 (approx. US 137) per month. These figures hide considerable variation, according to the availability of work. Some trained male masons reported earning NRs 1,200 per day; women rarely received more than NRs 800.

A breakdown of trainees by caste and ethnicity showed that the majority were Dalit or Janajati (indigenous hills groups). This is as expected, given that they were the target group.

Unfortunately, the early, relatively positive findings for trained women have not held up in the longer term. Although data has not been collected systematically, it is widely observed that substantial numbers of women gave up reconstruction work once house-building in their immediate neighbourhood was completed. On the other hand, there are women who have established themselves successfully in the reconstruction business - demonstrating that this is possible.

Making quotas work for women

The 30% quota for women was important in gaining local community acceptance of women taking up a male-dominated skill. Nevertheless, most training providers interpreted the quota to mean that three trainees in every group of 10 had to be women. This narrow interpretation was often unhelpful. Many women trainees spoke of having been somewhat coerced into conducting the training, as otherwise the course would have been cancelled. Once split into groups of five for house-building, women found themselves working only with men, or with one other woman. Most men already had some experience of house building, whilst the women generally did not. In many cases, the women were subject to ridicule by the men, or given simpler on-site tasks - preventing them from learning more deeply. As a result, they lacked full confidence in their skills at the end of the training, with many stating that they had not learned enough to work independently –

a comment that was rarely made by men. The most confident women were those who had been trained in all-women, or women majority, groups. Such groups tended to have a sense of camaraderie and of supporting each other.

Selecting appropriate women

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, families were desperate to rebuild their lives. The women who took part in these early trainings often had no intention to develop a career in construction; they simply wanted to rebuild their own homes, and perhaps those of immediate relatives. In training courses held later, greater care was taken to screen women who were genuinely interested to work in the construction sector. Nevertheless, family and group dynamics were not always fully considered. It is important to discuss the training with the family members, and gain assurances that they – not only husbands, but also in-laws - will support the woman in working outside. This includes accepting that she will need to travel to different construction sites, something that goes against traditional norms of restricted women's mobility. In this respect, there may be genuine concerns, as building sites are not known as women-friendly environments; safeguards against sexual harassment or abuse are needed. Having the support of family members also includes helping with the unpaid care duties that are generally viewed as women's responsibility, such as cooking, cleaning and caring for children and the elderly. Unless these tasks are redistributed or reduced, it can be impossible for women to undertake paid work outside the home. A suggestion coming from women trainees was that they themselves should participate in selecting who is trained, as they have a better idea of who will be able to work afterwards and form a cohesive group.

The importance of role models and gender-sensitive trainers

Women who were trained early on and took up construction work successfully – earning from it a good income – became role models for others. Not only did they inspire other women to follow their lead; they also helped to break down prejudices in the wider community. Similarly,

women trainers can have an extremely important function as role models. Even if women trainers are unavailable, a male trainer who is conscious of the constraints faced by women can make a significant difference in ensuring that women are encouraged and supported. Many trainers are unaware of their own gender biases. External observers can help in providing feedback and advice in this regard.

Additional capacity building

Women's need for further training has been taken up in Helvetas' current support for skills training in construction. In addition to the regular 50-day course, women who are motivated to work as contractors are now offered a course in business skills and "life skills" – covering aspects such as knowing their basic legal rights, building their self-confidence and negotiation capacities. At the same time, a "top up" seven-day training is offered only to women, enabling them to become master masons.

Key pointers to success

Women have a significant role to play in the construction sector in Nepal. Although the 2015 earthquake was devastating, it did provide an opportunity for some of the survivors to learn new skills, opening the door to a new livelihood opportunity. Women from disadvantaged backgrounds (particularly Dalits and Janajatis who are economically poor) have proved that they can become skilled masons and carpenters, or indeed building contractors. The most important lessons learned in supporting them in this career are as follows.

- **Women's groups:** Quotas can help in ensuring that women gain opportunities in a male-dominated field, but they should be implemented in a sensitive manner – grouping women for mutual support, rather than scattering them in male-majority groups. Self-selection of group members may also be appropriate – so that women build mutual support mechanisms from the start. Women working as a group are also stronger in guarding against sexual harassment.
- **Family consultation:** The selection of women for training should include

consultation with their family members, discussing the implications of training and gaining assurances that the woman will be encouraged and supported in putting her training to full use.

- **Gender-responsive training:** Training courses can include inherent gender biases in terms of attitudes and opportunities. Training instructors need to be aware of this, and to actively combat such biases. This ranges from avoiding inappropriate remarks or jokes to ensuring that a toilet that can be used by women is available, or that child care is organised as and if necessary.



Women resource persons: Women who have become successful entrepreneurs following skills training are important role models. They can be recognized and supported as resource persons, advising other women.

- **Top-up training:** Women who have undergone the 50-day course often require top-up training to build a successful livelihood in construction work. This training includes technical, business, and life skills; such courses should be developed and offered according to their needs.

“I left my studies in grade nine due to family problems and I was really worried about my future. Now I am happy to get a job in my own village. I have started contributing to my household expenses and I also want to save money for my future as a mason.”

Kamali Galan,
Mason, Kalika Gaunpalika, Rasuwa

For further information, contact

Balmukunda Neupane
Employment Fund secretariat
efsr.np@helvetas.org



HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Nepal

Dhobighat-3, P.O.Box 688, Lalitpur Nepal
Phone: +977 1 5524926
Fax: +977 1 5531109

co.np@helvetas.org
<https://helvetas.org/en/nepal>