

Handicapped—By Gender Or By Men's Attitudes ?



I WOULD like to share my experience of the difficulties I have to face because I have entered a heavily male dominated profession.

After graduation, I decided to go in for chartered accountancy which entails undergoing articleship with a firm of chartered accountants for three years. During this time, the student has to clear the intermediate and final examinations conducted by the Institute of Chartered Accountants. Normally, it takes about four years to complete the course. Therefore, I had to begin by convincing my parents that the course was not unsuitable for women. They were afraid that I would be “on the shelf” by the time I qualified. I managed to assure them that I would pass the examination in three years.

Then began the frustrating task of finding a reasonably good firm which would want me as an articled clerk despite my obvious “handicap”—my sex. I had secured a first division in the B Com honours examination which entitled me to a reserved seat with any chartered accountant. Every chartered accountant can hire two articled clerks over and above the minimum number if these two are first division B Com honours graduates. Despite this advantage, I found it difficult to get into a good firm.

A lot of firms do not take in women

as a matter of policy because they assume that “girls do not go on outstation audit”, “can’t stay back after 5 p.m.,” and “can’t be sent to Old Delhi areas.” Anyway, I finally did manage to get into a good firm. I had to go through an elaborate interview where I was repeatedly asked if I would stay back late when necessary and would go on outstation audits. I assured them that I had no objection to doing so. I realised later, however, that they win either way—it is not what I am willing to do that counts; it is what they think I ought to be capable of doing which is more important.

On my second audit, when a partner of our firm was present in the office for finalisation of an audit, he asked us all to stay back late one day as the audit had to be finished fast. I presumed that I was included in the “all.” While I was working in the evening, at about 6 p.m., he suddenly woke up to the fact that I was there, and asked: “What are you doing here? Why haven’t you gone home?”

I told him I had stayed back because he had asked all of us to stay. “No, I don’t want any girls staying after 5 p.m.,” he replied. I tried to convince him that I was quite capable of going home even at 9 p.m., but he refused to be convinced. “You are confident but the city is not safe”, he said.

Later, when I insisted on staying, he

asked me if any man from our team stayed near my house. I told him there was one who lived in that area. Then he reluctantly agreed to let me stay, on condition that I went back with him.

Later, he was heard lamenting to one of my male colleagues : “I would never let my sister go out so late”—“so late” being 7.45 p.m.

I felt absolutely frustrated by this experience. Here I am, training to be a professional, wanting to be as good as the best, and here is this man deciding when I should be packed off home. Surely, at the age of 22, I should have the right to decide at what hour the city becomes “unsafe.” In any case, I firmly believe that the city will become safer only when more and more women are seen on the streets after dark.

At present, a vicious circle is in operation. The streets are unsafe because there aren’t any women around and there are no women around because the streets are unsafe. So the way to make the city safer is not to stop those women who do go out at night but rather to encourage more women to go out.

I felt like telling him that the city is “safer” at 8 than at 5 p.m., because there are fewer men around at 8 than at 5 p.m. Few experiences can be more harrowing than a journey in a DTC bus at 5 p.m., the rush hour.

I wondered how far I would progress in my profession if my day ended at 5 p.m., how my male colleagues would respect me and treat me as an equal if I was not allowed to work as hard as they are. They already have a strong prejudice against women and firmly believe that women have a more comfortable time than men because they do not have to stay late and work as hard as men do. Further, I would also lose out on almost all learning opportunities, since most important things regarding an audit are dealt with during finalisation of an audit.

Even though I did stay back late for a couple of days, I felt very foolish because I had been told not to do so, in the presence of my male colleagues. They are highly amused by the fact that I stayed back even though I was not really needed. They treated me with amused indulgence after that incident.

A few months later, I heard that the management was trying to convince the men in our firm to go on a particular outstation audit. I knew it was an excellent opportunity to learn computerised accounting. So another woman and I

went to volunteer to go on this audit. The client had provided accommodation for auditors. Yet, we were refused permission to go.

Later, we found out that the management had asked the men in the team if they would “take responsibility for girls on the team.” The men had refused to take any such responsibility therefore we were denied the opportunity to go on that audit.

It is pathetic to think that these same men are going to refuse admission to new women applicants because “girls can’t stay late and can’t go on outstation audits.”

MAMTA JAITLEY

Using Manushi In Rural Women’s Programmes

Manushi is used by many social and political activists in the course of their work. Here, one activist shares her experiments in such use. We would appreciate getting more such feedback which can also encourage others to conduct similar experiments.

I WOULD like to share my experience of working in the Women’s Development Programme of the Rajasthan government, and the use we made of **Manushi** while working with rural women.

The programme is in operation on an experimental basis in six districts of Rajasthan—Jaipur, Ajmer, Bhilwada, Udaipur and Banswada. The programme is organised and run by women. Thus, it manages to attract a number of women who are involved in rural development. The programme aims at encouraging rural women to come together and discuss their problems with a view to demanding solutions.

One woman in each village, known as a *sathin*, works through the women’s development centre at the village *panchayat* level. This woman may be uneducated. She does this work in addition to her domestic and employment responsibilities. She is not a government employee.

The *sathin* is helped by a *pracheta* who is a full time government employee. To begin with, primary school teachers and village level workers were inducted into this job. There were 100 *sathins* and 10 *prachetas* in each district, at the start.

At the district level, technical help and information is given by different voluntary organisations. These organisations also train the *sathins* and *prachetas*. I am involved in these training programmes which normally last from 15 days to a month.

The programme begins with each participant introducing herself. This is followed by discussions, songs, dances, games. The participants are given any information they seek.

We equipped ourselves with relevant literature for the programmes. **Manushi** was used in a variety of ways. I cannot give more than a superficial account of this use. For years, **Manushi** has helped to develop our thinking. I cannot

concretely measure the extent to which **Manushi** has helped develop our understanding and enhance our knowledge. Nor can I enumerate all the occasions on which we have used **Manushi** during discussions.

In the course of training, we give the trainees **Manusbi** to read in small groups and ask them to discuss or write about various articles in a larger group. Most of them came into contact with **Manushi** for the first time during the programme.

For instance, we read articles on law and asked women to write their reactions. One of the district officers, Pritam, is a doctor. She guided our discussions on health. She told us that in the medical profession, the body is looked at as a machine and thinking remains confined to illness and its cure but **Manushi** leads us to realise that women’s health problems are intimately related to society’s beliefs about women’s bodies. So women’s health can improve only



A women's group at work

when society and women themselves stop being contemptuous of the female body.

While discussing various issues, we often cite information from **Manushi** to reinforce our arguments. For instance, on the occasion of the festival of Janmashtami, we were discussing in the Padmapura group why women keep fasts. We talked about the lives of Radha, Mira and Sita. In the course of this discussion, we read aloud the folksong "The Sita who refused the fire ordeal" from **Manushi** No. 8 and discussed it. In their report of the discussion, the trainees wrote: "The religious texts, have all been written by men. If women had written them, they would have written more about women's sufferings."

When the Manaklao programme began, and trainees were narrating their experiences, one woman from Ajmer told us about a woman who had been molested by the police. Most of the women reacted by saying that women who come into the clutches of the police must be immoral women. We then discussed the various possible circumstances under which a woman may

fall into the clutches of the police and be locked up in a Nari Niketan. We then cited the case of Savitri written about in **Manushi** No. 9 and discussed how a girl like her can be deprived of the freedom to earn her living.

While speaking of women's sexuality and the societal tendency to castigate her desire for sexual pleasure as immoral, we discussed in detail the article on clitoridectomy in **Manushi** No. 8. We found that many women did not even know about the existence of the clitoris and did not know about the structure of their own bodies. Also, they became acquainted with the condition of women in Africa, about which they had known nothing.

We had to face some criticism after this discussion. An officer objected that the discussion of sexuality was not "useful." We had talked about the various abusive terms which are linked with women's bodies. We were told that such discussion was indecent while the women felt it was a realistic and natural discussion.

The women react very strongly to such discussions. They composed some

songs in which they expressed their anger. One song said "Men are wolves who have united to chew up women." Another said "Do not trust anyone, neither father, brother nor husband." Afterwards, our male colleagues criticised us, saying that we were giving antimale training. In fact, we had invited men to our discussions, and had written in our evaluation reports that women's development is linked to that of men.

We discussed a number of informative articles from **Manushi** such as those relating to the Chipko movement, to Sewa, to the Chhatisgarh Mahila Sangathan, to violence on women, to the history of international women's day and to law. Many of these articles were xeroxed and distributed.

We try to link the information given with the women's own personal experiences. In this way, it is easier for the women to remember what their legal rights are. For instance, we asked if they remembered the vows exchanged at the wedding ceremony. They did not. We then explained that women must be alert to the rights they have, and should try to get them implemented. Our ignorance of our own rights also inhibits our progress.

Although we have not been able to use **Manushi** in a very systematic or thoughtful way, yet we have managed to acquaint all the women with it. They either become subscribers or read it in the office whenever they have some time to spare.

(translated from Hindi)

