

Changing paradigm

on shop floor



How a tractor manufacturing unit has made its shop floor gender inclusive with success

GEETU VAID

Her fingers move nimbly to assemble parts and her gaze is fixed on the task in hand as she goes about her daily routine, but her work makes 20-something Ruby Pal special as well as a pioneer of sorts in her field. She is among the first few women selected to work on the shop floor of Mahindra's Swaraj Division — a leading brand of tractors in India and a part of the \$16.9 billion Mahindra Group. The state-of-the-art tractor manufacturing facility in Mohali is among the first tractor unit in the region to employ women on the shop floor — a traditional male bastion. Armed with a diploma in mechanical engineering Ruby, who hails from Karnal, was among the first batch of seven girls that Mahindra picked up for its workforce diversity initiative a few years ago. With the gritty and hardworking girls taking up the challenge of performing male-dominated roles in tractor manufacturing successfully, the company now has over 35 women employees working at different stations in Plant-1 and Plant-2 in Swaraj.

Working on heavy duty machines and tasks on factory shop floor has always remained an ultimate challenge for women. While the story of Sudha Murthy nee Kulkarni who "wrested" the right to work on shop floor from the legendary J.R.D. Tata by questioning Tata Motors' unwillingness to even interview women engineers for this job in 1974 is well known, it was not an easy space to tread on for women employees for a number of years.

Apart from the physically taxing nature of work, traditionally shop floors were dominated by male managers and workers who lacked "sophistication" to use gender-sensi-



tive language and behaviour. The factory law preventing women from working at night, too, contributed to limiting female workers in assembly line production.

Swaraj, however, is among a handful of companies like Tata Motors, Anand Automotive and Cummins India Ltd, an arm of the leading US-based automobile engine maker, that are giving preference to women while hiring.

Well-thought out and codified policies incorporated in their system have played an important role in making shop floors more gender inclusive in these firms. "Most of these girls are from small towns and conservative backgrounds and they had to do a lot of convincing in their families to work in a factory where most of their co-workers are men. Thus, without a proper system in place for them the whole initiative would have back fired", says Viren Popli, Chief Operating Officer, SWARAJ Tractor Division, Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd. As a COO challenging the status quo promoting a more diverse culture was a tight rope walk, he shares. The first step was to identify and recruit girls with a mindset conducive to working in an all-male environment. The organisation was looking for engineering diploma

holders who were outgoing and confident and eager to take on the challenges of the shop floor. And the girls were ready to take on this challenge. "Though my family was apprehensive when I got the job offer, it was not a major concern for me as I was used to being in an environment where males outnumbered women during my diploma course also. Having a well-laid out strategy to induct and train has gone a long way in making all the women currently working here comfortable," says Sonia Hiranwal, who has worked in assembly shop and coupling shop

during her five-year stint at the plant.

However, the challenges were there at every step, "Initially, the idea did meet with some reservations from supervisors who were apprehensive about how the young girls would manage the machines, but the management soon convinced them of the girls' abilities and potential. The men — most of whom were much older than the girls, soon took on an almost fatherly role and mentored the new recruits, easing them into the rigours of life on the shop floor", he adds.

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Gender sensitisation for both the girls as well as the men on the shop floor was also an important aspect of the training programme. A psychologist addressed these sessions and the girls were encouraged to speak up in case of any discomfort. A counsellor trained in industrial psychology was also on call.

Besides these the practical problems involving the availability of right sized safety equipment, uniform, gloves etc also had to be tackled. "Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) like safety helmets and gloves are usually designed keeping men in

mind so these had to be customised to fit the girls' smaller build n size. These however, are the only concessions shown to the girls who had to work the same demanding shifts as their male counterparts", adds Viren. The inclusion of women workforce has also resulted in the use of more mechanized hauls, lifts and robotic power being used for the various jobs on the shop floor. "All this has made the work easier for men also, something that they have welcomed over the years", says Viren, who believes that the whole work culture in the unit has undergone a sea change with the inclusion of

women workers.

The women on the shop floor have been excelling not only in their day to day work but have also won accolades for the company at different platforms. Many of them are part of Quality Circle or QC meetings where they identify, analyse and solve work-related problems. Today there are some all women Quality Circle teams working in the plants and even won awards at the International Convention for Quality Control Circles in South Korea last year.

With the shop floor getting gender inclusive the company is now targeting to have over 100 women workers by 2018.