
Rewriting The Rules: Breeze/Storming their way in to the Male Bastion**Dr. Bhanumathi Haran**Associate Professor
GFGC, Devanahalli.**Abstract**

This paper celebrates womanhood in all its dimensions. Here as the title suggests I have taken examples of empowered woman—one example each, both illiterate and literate—who have powered themselves and rewritten their own rules and breeze/stormed their way to the male bastion. The key words are empowered, challenge, physically demanding and psychological challenge.

India is a land of Gods/legends. Shiva is one of the trinity Gods, who is called 'Ardhanarishwara' i.e., a combination of male and female energy-both halves. It is also said men are a part of women linguistically speaking i.e., Wo/men. The time has come to make this symbol a reality. The society is evolving and will have to accept anything that is different from the existing understanding and practice. But from the women's point of view life is still a struggle and continued challenges in various spheres of her activities. The UNIFEM- The United Nations Development Fund for Women has listed four components of an empowered women.

1. Acquiring knowledge and an understanding of gender/power relations and ways in which these relations may be changed.
2. Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life
3. Gaining the ability to generate choices and thereby acquiring leverage and bargaining power; and
4. Developing the ability to generate, organize or influence the direction of social change to create just social and economic orders nationally and internationally

Now let us see how an illiterate woman Manju Devi empowered herself. Manju Devi the first woman for the entire North Western Railway region to take up the job of a "coolie" (porter)-- this profession is considered a male bastion. She started working at the Jaipur railway station in 2012. She has been a sole breadwinner for her three teenage children, all of them studying. After losing her husband she approached the railway authorities and requested them to transfer her deceased husband's license and badge.

With the help of her mother and her children she overcame family disputes and psychological hurdles. Encouraged by her mother Mohini, Manju Devi acquired her deceased husband Mahadev's porter license no. 15 and took to the demanding task of hauling luggage of passengers at the Jaipur Railway Station. The Railway Authorities initially in a tell tale manner parroted that there were no women porters and hence this task would be difficult for her. But Manju Devi states "I told the authorities about my difficulties. They trained me for six months and gradually I picked up". Her persistence and perseverance made her grasp the realities of her job and the major challenge included designing her own uniform. Now clad in a red kurta and white salwar, sets out every day to work in multiple shifts, to make ends meet for her family.

Being a porter is physically very demanding, but with three children to take care of, Manju Devi takes on everyday with great grit and fortitude. Initially Manju Devi being illiterate did not know how the platforms were numbered and had to squarely depend on passengers and fellow porters to locate coaches and seats. Talking about her profession Manju Devi states that "I weighed 30 kgs and the passengers' luggage was also 30 kgs but it was nowhere to the burden of feeding three children". Finally, Manju Devi has empowered herself and won the life battle. She was among a gathering of 90 women achievers from different backgrounds at Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi.

The second example is that of the Chennai woman Ms Soloman a mother of two and an English Literature Graduate from Madras University took up the rarest of rare jobs of running a Hindu Crematorium. She has been managing this --120-year-old Valankadu crematorium—which is the city's oldest and busiest cremation grounds.

The opportunity had come her way when the [Indian Community Welfare Organisation](#), the NGO she had been working with for 12 years, won the contract to run the 120-year-old Valankadu crematorium.

Right from the selection of her career Ms. Soloman had to face many barriers. Some practices prevent women from entering the crematorium. The explanation often has been that it is for their own wellbeing - since women are "softer and weaker" and may be traumatised by the death rituals. Further the land where she runs the crematorium was long neglected, the cremation ground had become a dumping ground for rubbish - and groups of men assembled there every night to drink. ICWO chief AJ Hariharan says "We thought we would make it a safe place for women and girls to come and spend the last moments with their loved ones. We wanted to create a calm and healing

place". Only two women volunteered for this venture the first being Ms. Soloman and the second was Ms. Devya Raju.

The psychological challenge was huge and she fought her way through. In her own words "Some teased us, some passed filthy remarks. Some even questioned what type of a woman would come and work here. They said we must be bad people and that was very hurtful." Further there were Vettians the funeral organizers. These people were dependent on the cremation ground for their living and thought that they would lose their jobs. So they threatened to throw acid on her face. The funeral organizers initially demanded bribe money though the funeral was run by the civic authorities. The whole scenario changed when the Vettians found out that they would not lose their jobs. For every dead body they cremate the civic authorities pay them 750/- rupees. The first three months was the toughest and now the place is secure with a building a boundary wall around. This 4.5-acre grounds have security cameras and the place is well lit up at night. It also now has facilities such as clean toilets, dust bins, and brightly coloured benches and dozens of trees and pot plants have been brought in to make the area more attractive. Her unusual career choice did surprise her family and the both volunteers say that the families were supportive.

Soloman says that Chennai floods was the toughest part to manage. As large parts of the city went down under flood waters, and most of Chennai's 140 cremations grounds became inaccessible, she ensured the fires kept burning at Velankadu. In normal situations they would get five to six bodies to cremate. But now with floods the numbers doubled or tripled. As per her statistics they cremated 246 bodies alone in the month of November. Ms. Soloman's thought about death is fascinating. "There's nothing after death, that's what I understand," she says. "So be happy, enjoy what you're doing and do something good while you're alive." Many honors have come to her.

Conclusion

The above mentioned examples do prove and fulfill the qualities of an empowered woman. As far as Manju Devi is concerned being an illiterate and hard pressed for money she did storm/breeze the male bastion and changed the gender power relationships. Soloman and Devya Raju did understand their ability, developed strong will power to face many battles be it psychological, social or cultural. These examples do reflect how these women generated their own choices and took maximum advantage of the situation by fulfilling the third component as stated by UNIFEM. Finally, these women became a harbinger for social change and have created a dent in the patriarchal order which illustrates that they are powered and empowered.

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