

Companies get more women to work in factories

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MUMBAI: The participation of women workers in factories and the manufacturing process may not have gone beyond 10% overall, but a nail products factory of Hindustan Unilever (HUL) at Haridwar is changing that paradigm. It's being run by an all-women's team. While this is perhaps an industry first, many such big steps are now being taken by women workers in the FMCG industry.

At Gits Food Products (Gits), 95% of its labour force today is female, while at Procter & Gamble's Hyderabad plant, legal approvals have been sought to ensure women work in all shifts. Two startups have also entered the same group: Prothom Industries, a contract manufacturer and exporter of toys to one of the world's largest toy companies, has an all-women assembly process with 300 workers. And in Mumbai-based Mydentist, a dental care chain, about 90% of its 1,000 plus workforce is women.



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The factory, which is spread over 2 acres, delivers an annual turnover of about Rs 70 crore. The team includes 25 female shop-floor employees, and an executive who runs the operations including five packing lines. The weekly production capacity is 3.6 lakh units, along with a facility for packing 250 shades of nail products.

"There is a need to enhance opportunities for women, particularly at the shop-floor employee level. Empowering women makes sense for our business because women's inclusion in the economic cycle has a magnifying impact on growth and the health and progress of their families and communities," said B P Biddappa, executive director (HR), HUL.

Companies like HUL are taking steps to hard-wire diversity into their organizations and include manufacturing as well in the process. At Gits, an instant foods maker, it was a conscious decision on the part of the organization to hire women workers at its Pune plant.

"Most of the women that are employed are the primary bread-winners of their families. Women are also very efficient workers. There is a sense of ownership that they possess towards their work which makes them better workers," said Samana Tejani, director (production), Gits.

GOING ALL OUT

- Cos are realizing women's inclusion in the economic cycle magnifies growth, and the health & progress of their families and communities
- HR executives say women make very efficient workers as they possess a sense of ownership towards their job

- At HUL's nail products factory at Haridwar, the all-women team delivered a 40% increase in productivity and 8% in equipment efficiency in Q4FY15
- P&G's Hyderabad plant employs 30% women who operate manufacturing equipment and work across all shifts, for which permissions were taken
- At Gits, 95% of the labour force is female and several women have worked their way up the hierarchy at the instant foods company

Women workers are not merely working at the lower rungs at Gits, they have worked their way up the hierarchy. Its current factory woman manager, who deals with women workers on the factory floor, was once a factory production floor worker who has moved up the ladder to gain a top position in the organization.

On the other hand, P&G's Hyderabad plant, which employs more than 200 people, was one of the first plants to have 30% women across the workforce. What is unique is that these women employees operate across all shifts and operate manufacturing equipment and are not limited to peripheral tasks.

The Factories Act prohibits women from working in a factory from 7pm to 6am. HUL's Haridwar factory only runs one shift from 7am to 3pm. P&G,

however, got an approval to allow women to work in all shifts. "In an unprecedented move, we collaborated with the government and got legal approval to allow women to work across shifts. In order for us to do this, we arranged necessary infrastructural support including special transport for women with a GPS-based tracking mechanism and optimum security," said Sonali Roychowdhury, country head (HR), P&G India.

Vikram Shroff, head (HR law), Nishith Desai Associates, a legal and tax counseling firm, said, "While such a restriction in the Factories Act may appear discriminatory and biased, women working in night shifts has always been a sensitive issue in our country. At the same time, given the unique needs of the Indian IT, outsourcing and allied sectors, some state governments have taken a liberal approach to allow women to work in night shifts in such commercial establishments as long as the employer ensures their safety and security, including while traveling to office and back home."

Amendments have been introduced to the state-specific shops and establishments enactments to allow organizations to remain open with night shifts.

That apart, a lot goes into on-boarding and training women workers. HUL had conducted comprehensive training for the all-women workers' team at Haridwar to ensure a smooth transition. The training included technical classroom sessions by an external ITI professor and four weeks of on-the-job training to ensure business continuity. "The all-women team hit the ground running by delivering success in the first quarter of taking over operations. The unit delivered 40% increase in productivity and 8% increase in overall equipment efficiency in the March quarter 2015," said Biddappa.

During recruitment, P&G had engagement sessions between shortlisted candidates, their parents and the entire Hyderabad leadership team to communicate the company's commitment to safety, security and long-term careers. All such initiatives helped the company attract women workers during the hiring drives, taking the gender diversity to 30% women at the factory which makes fabric care products under Tide.