Ladies And The Chocolate Factory

From left: Praveena V, Saritha, Mouli N, Swarna K and Gowri BG are among the women workers at the Mondelez factory in Sri City

SHEPHALI BHATT

American confectionery giant Mondelez's best performing Indian factory is unique – half its staff are women

:: Shephali Bhatt

At Mondelez India's manufacturing unit in Sri City, Andhra Pradesh – the US-headquartered FMCG giant's largest factory among its 35 plants in the AMEA (Asia, Middle East and Africa) region – your first point of contact at the security booth is a woman. Dressed in the company's cobalt blue uniform for the security staff, she takes you through the guidelines to visit the 134 acre facility that can produce 3 billion units of Cadbury chocolates that sell at ₹5 apiece. It sets the tone for the rest of the plant visit – nearly half the 300 permanent employees on the production floor are women.

According to the 2018 report of the Ministry of Labour & Employment, India's organised sector (public and private) employs 3 crore workers. Only 61 lakh, or 20.5%, are women. At 12%, the proportion of women in the manufacturing sector is even lower. The gender diversity at the Mondelez factory, therefore, is remarkable. Factory floors with their heavy machinery and harsh working conditions tend to be male bastions. But Mondelez has shown that gender parity and equality can be achieved in industrial settings with a little thought and effort. When the plant was set up three years ago, the company set out to build a factory floor with equal representation of women. "Sri City started as a greenfield project. We wanted to establish high-performance work systems at the facility. We felt gender parity will bring in the uniqueness to help us achieve that," says Vidya Kumar, plant HR lead at Mondelez India.

"Diversity helps us take the plant's performance to the next level. Sri City is currently the best performing plant for Mondelez in India"
Nandkumar Kulkarni
manufacturing head, Mondelez India

Of the 300 employees on the production floor, or shop floor, as they like to call it, 149 are women. Mondelez approached families of villages in and around Andhra Pradesh to hire these women. "We interviewed these girls while most of them were still in college. Then brought their parents to our facility to show them that Mondelez has built a safe and secure work environment for their daughters," says Kumar.

A number of thoughtful measures go into making sure the women employees find it to be a safe and welcoming workplace. For most of these women, this is their first job. The organisation conducts a 6-12 month training programme in Bengaluru to expose them to the industrial environment. They stay in a company hostel 20 minutes away from the plant. Pick-up and drop and hostel food come at a subsidised rate deducted from their salary. There's a crèche inside the facility for young mothers. A medical centre stays open 24/7. A gynaecologist visits the site every fortnight. The women's changing room on the ground floor and the female restrooms on all the four floors of the plant have a sanitary napkin dispenser mounted on one wall. Most factory machinery comes equipped with a vacuum lifter to aid women in lifting heavy bags. "We give them technical training so that most of their factory work is not physical but that of adding value to the physical process by use of technology to bring consistency in cost, quality, safety and delivery," says Nandkumar Kulkarni, manufacturing head at Mondelez India. Sri City is Mondelez's best performing plant in India, he adds.

Women are paid on a par with men for the same role. All employees on the shop floor are in the age group of 21-26. "We're also doing the same work, right from mixing raw materials to checking packaging quality to dispatch," says Swarna K, 22, who works in the packaging department. For the men around her, it's a different experience to see women get equal opportunities at the workplace and earn for their families instead of depending on others for money.

The money is empowering for these women, most of whom have fought hard to convince their fathers to let them work. Gowri BG, 23, has been able to build a house for her parents in her native town Nagari in the Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh, with ₹4 lakh she saved from her salary over the last three years. "It was always a dream but I never thought I'll realise it so soon," she says.

Speaking in English is encouraged inside the plant. It has helped Mouli N, 25, who studied in Telugu medium. "I've picked up the language well. I teach my team new words in English every day now." Some of her students are men, too.

For a factory setup to embrace diversity, it's important to coach men to play their part in the process, says Sairee Chahal, founder of Sheroes, a community platform offering support and work opportunities for women. "Most men in India grow up without having a conversation on sex education, consent, and choice. Their patriarchal attitudes keep getting reinforced at work. Men have to be shown that inclusion is good for them as well, that women are not taking their jobs from them but adding value to the company," she adds.

Mondelez organises an annual campaign called Lakshman Rekha to teach male and female workers about respecting gender boundaries at work. The message is often conveyed through street plays performed by the team members in Telugu. Lakshman Rekha campaign has taught 24-year-old Gopi Krishna what's the proper way of talking to women at work. "No gender is supposed to dominate the other. We have to respect each other's role in the system. Sometimes women work harder than us," he says.

"If the Lakshman Rekha is crossed, women have the option to approach separate committees meant to hear such grievances," says Saritha, 21, who works on the packaging line.

The smell of cocoa across the plant doesn't tempt them anymore. The process of making a chocolate fascinates still. They get wide-eyed talking about the urge to eat a bar or two while working, then go on to lift 10 kg cartons, and navigate advanced machine tech effortlessly. Their ambitions range from buying the most popular phone to the next best car. In some of the sections on the production line, women outnumber men. In yet others, men report to women. For a change, these women are getting a taste of what it is like to be the gender wielding power at the workplace. ■

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Gender Parity @ Mondelez Sri City

WHEN
The Sri City plant was set up 3 years ago with the intent of having gender parity at the production floor

WHY
Mondelez wanted to establish high-performance work systems at the facility. It felt gender parity will enable that

HOW
- Convince family members of graduate girls of safe working environment at the facility
- Conduct 6-12 month training programme in Bengaluru to expose women to industrial environment
- Organise campaigns like Lakshman Rekha to educate men and women about respecting boundaries at the workplace

Women-friendly features at the factory

- Sanitary napkin dispensers in women's changing room and washrooms
- Use of vehicles and vacuum lifters to help women lift heavy material without too much physical effort

300 employees on the production floor at Mondelez Sri City factory

149 women employees on the production floor at Sri City factory

20.5% is proportion of women employees in the organised sector in India

25% of staff at Mondelez India's corporate end are women

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