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A woman contractor from Shopian challenging stereotypes

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Shopian: Sporting a pheran with floral motifs stitched on its neck and hem, Sadia Banoo, 55, could be seen supervising the construction of a small drain at a dusty village in south Kashmir's Shopian district. She kept a close eye on the workers as they poured concrete into the formwork. Banoo did not leave the site until the entire construction was completed.

A resident of quaint Balpora village, some 4 kms from Shopian town, Banoo is a woman contractor who works in the male-dominated field of construction.

"In a patriarchal social set-up, she has the temerity to challenge the gender stereotypes", says a local social activist. Although Banoo is unlettered, she has her ear to the ground and is acquainted with almost every government scheme meant for rural women.

A few years ago, Banoo had heard about the formation of Self Help Groups and she went ahead to form one.

"I formed a Self Help Group of twenty young women and we all got benefited," says Banoo.

The women, Banoo says, learnt needlework and became financially independent within a year.

Banoo's initiative in her area was appreciated by all and sundry, and she was even compelled by locals to contest the assembly elections, which she refused to.

Last year, when the government announced to limit developmental works up to Rs 3 lakh for local Panchayat residents, Banoo visited the office of a local Block Development Officer (BDO) to enquire about the procedure for receiving the work contracts for these small projects.

Soon Banoo got herself registered with the department and a Panchayat Level Tendering card was issued in her favour. "Since then I started participating in the tendering process and received a few contracts", says Banoo.

A drain, an embankment and a lane in her neighbourhood are some of the projects Banoo got constructed.

" Whenever I'm awarded a work contract, the first thing I think about is using standard material", she says.

In a male chauvinist society where women Banoo makes unceasing efforts to carry out her projects impeccably.

" I don't want anyone to raise a finger at me due to my gender", Banoo says while gesturing towards a recently constructed lane in her Balpora neighbourhood.

However, the go-getter woman faces a plethora of challenges on multiple counts. She says that it is rather difficult to work in men-dominated or men-only workspaces.

According to Banoo, her male colleagues make every possible effort to hold her back from getting new projects.

"But I have a firm belief that if you work with integrity no one can stop you", she says.

Jahid Azad, Block Development Officer (BDO) Shopian said that he found the works executed as " Women mate" under MNREGA by Banoo up to scratch.

"We are highly impressed by her work and are issuing Panchayat Level Tendering Cards to other women as well. We believe that they will give stiff competition to male contractors in the execution of the Rural Development Department (RDD) works under the Capex budget.

The department also recognised Banoo's work and felicitated her on International Women's Day this year.