

Social and professional attitudes in the making of women architects.

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In a society where there is overt discrimination towards the female, I am aware that most women in our country do not strive for equality or opportunity but are continuously struggling for survival and sometimes even life. Compared to this vast population of lower and middle-class women, ours is rather an elitist gathering and one can even question the validity of this discussion we are having today.

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Therefore, it is with immense humility and self-consciousness that I present my views on women and architecture. It is for the same reason that my discourse concentrates not on the finer aspects of the designing of architecture (which are constantly debated in many a seminar and conferences) but on the making of women architects. The aim of the presentation is to create an awareness among ourselves, to share with you my thoughts and to learn from your experiences and successes.

Of the issues we face as women architects, some are common to all professions while others are specific to architectural practice. Nonetheless, every one I spoke to agreed that for a woman to be good was not good enough and one had to constantly prove better in order to prove equal. So not only do we have the majority of household and children's nurturing responsibilities but we have to work doubly hard a challenge not easy to handle by everyone.

Let us take a look at the social context in which we operate in India. We are always considered women first and professionals later. A man has his work, a woman her home is the classical division of labour. When children are sick, servants not there, social functions have to be attended, a man is excused because his

time is indisputably treated as more valuable than a woman's. The social norms of role playing as daughter, a wife, a mother are much more dominating compared to professional expectations from her. (For example, single women practising architecture complain of the need to be far too aggressive and abrasive to be taken seriously—a fact that contradicts their very feminine nature and basic human values). We are also handicapped by the perceptions and the aspirations of our families, husbands, colleagues, etc, which are often reflected in our self-image moulding our professional ambitions and achievements. All this adds up after children are

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born which causes either a break (often for 7 to 8 years) or a restriction on the available time for a woman's career. In a profession where consistency and continuity are required for personal development and experience field, a rather "macho" profession if I may be allowed to say so. Architecture is also a creative field which simultaneously requires a full range of technical knowledge and proficiency, something that mechanically gives diffidence to most women because of the way they have been brought up. In contrast to this, a typical, fresh male architect is thrust into the professional world, driven by the desire to succeed, the need to make a living and helped by the overall social perceptions of his performance, he is able to climb along the ladder of professional confidence and growth. If we examine the general educational system in Schools of Architecture in India, we will realize that the sheer lack of "down-to-earth," "nuts and bolts" practical training particularly hampers women graduates when they face the real world. On top of it all, the commercialisation of the profession in the past

decade, including the dominance of builders, have created further hurdles for women because haggling for jobs and operating in the corrupt culture does not traditionally come easy to them.

Therefore, we now come to the question, how can we improve the number, level and quality of our professional involvement and satisfaction, going beyond the in-built restrictions and attitudes that we face? Accepting the reality that in a patriarchal society, social change is generally brought about by men, we must also make all efforts possible for ourselves to create a support network, a forum for communication and by raising our own levels of discipline, ambition and expectations from ourselves. I take this opportunity to request the Indian Institute of Architects to relieve us from our symbolic and ornamental positions (such as

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giving garlands or singing bhajans) and increasingly involve us in the decision making, activity oriented processes. I also call upon the Council of Architecture to not only systematically promote women faculty but also to urgently look into certain fundamentals of architecture education for the benefit of all concerned students.

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