



Sonali Rastogi- Manoeuvring her way to lead gender-positive
Architectural Practice, Morphogenesis

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Sonali Rastogi, Co-founder and Principal Architect at India's leading Architectural Practice, Morphogenesis, discusses the trajectory of gender representation in her journey as an architect and how she, along with her co-founder and partner, Manit, went on to lead one of India's only gender-positive practices.

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*Sonali Rastogi, co-founder and partner,
Morphogenesis*

It has been a month since the **Gender Parity** (<https://architecture.live/gender-parity/>) team has been reiterating statistics on Gender representation within the profession. According to the data presented by the Council of Architecture in their recently concluded discussion 'Creating a Level Playing Field', 17% of female architects are self-employed, as against 35% of male architects. One amongst this 17% is India's leading architectural practice, **Morphogenesis's Co-Founder and Partner, Sonali Rastogi.**

Mainstream Architecture: Not a woman's place?

Coming from a family of Architects, Sonali spent a significant part of her childhood in a house where the living room was a studio. Despite her expected natural inclination towards architecture, her decision to be an architect received some scepticism from her architect father.

My father was a feminist. But, since he was familiar with the field, he wanted me to be sure of my decision, as female practising architects were nearly non-existent in mainstream architecture at that time. He made me explore other 'safer' creative options before finally being convinced about my decision to pursue architecture.

Sonali Rastogi

Over the years, the dominance that would start from the academic level observed a gradual increase- from two female students in Sonali's father's batch to 20% in Sonali's own to at least 50% females in today's architectural batches. But, similar to the present scenario, during Sonali's time at architectural school, a greater number of females would eventually choose academia over practice.

If a female wanted to be a practising architect, there were few successful role models to look up to.

Sonali Rastogi

Gender Representation and Dominance

Evidently (given the representation of women in her batch), when Sonali started as a practising architect, the figure of female architects practising was low. Thirty years later, she believes the current environment is more encouraging for females in architecture, with more women choosing architecture as their profession. She points out

the existence of the dominance by the male and female genders across different verticals in architecture, often fuelled by the biased perception of clients.

An architect works in many settings- studios, class studios, on sites, design presentations, with engineering consultants etc. There are verticals in our profession, such as interior design, academia, landscape architecture, lighting design, furniture design, and hospitality design, to name a few, where people expect a woman to walk in through the door. The client, who represents the larger society's perception, believes certain aspects gender-oriented.

Sonali Rastogi

While female dominance also seems to exist across several verticals, she believes male dominance exists in developer-driven work, where large projects are driven by finance, with boardrooms usually comprising men in finance, banking and real estate. The latter (Real estate), a newly semi-gentrified field, was earlier avoided by women. But today, with large real-estate companies emerging, is observing more women getting hired in real estate.

When I enter a boardroom, I often meet a woman as the head of marketing, sales, and projects.

Sonali Rastogi

Unlike the profession, which comes across as imbalanced, an architectural college usually observes equal male-female representation. Calling a creative college one of the most gender-neutral spaces, Sonali reminisces about her time at SPA Delhi to explain the gender-relationships.

During my time in SPA, it was common to walk into studios and see boys and girls sharing spaces- a boy could be sleeping on the top of a table and a girl sleeping under it after pulling all-nighters. As a day scholar, I would take my male friends' room key to sleep in their room. The culture was conducive to gender equality, and this equality had to suit both genders equally.

Sonali Rastogi

Personal Professional Experiences

While Sonali cites a creative college as one of the most gender-neutral spaces academically, as a practising architect, she considers the site the most gender-neutral ground. At the site, for the unskilled and semi-skilled workers, the architect, irrespective of their gender, is their boss.

Our position of power is already pre-established on-site. In my experience, I have only felt respect on site.

Sonali Rastogi

Sonali, however, has had her share of experiences of being put in the background. She recalls one such instance, which happened in the initial years of her practice.

In our firm's third year, Morphogenesis was awarded three of the five annual awards by the Indian Institute of Architects. The first newspaper article published post these wins mentioned only Manit (Rastogi, co-founder and partner at Morphogenesis); I was referred to as 'his wife, who also works with him'. This article came when I was putting in 15-hour work days while pregnant. I was working hard, but not only did the article mention me as his wife, it assumed that I was only involved in interior designing, which was not the case with the particular project. Both of us had worked on the architecture.

Sonali Rastogi

Gender Inclusive Workspace

Sonali helms Morphogenesis along with her Partner and Co-founder, Manit Rastogi. She credits Manit, her husband, for making Morphogenesis a gender-inclusive workplace by spearheading policies and promoting a safe environment for working women. She acknowledges these policies for the firm's 2019 recognition as one of the first few architectural practices to observe females receiving higher pay (2.05%) than males.

At Morphogenesis, we enact through policies. We allow working mothers one flexible day a week, where remaining work hours can be covered from home. We offer extended paid maternity leave to make the transition to work post-maternity leave more comfortable. We have also adopted certain aspects of life that employers tend to avoid. The latter, we found to be the most encouraging.

Sonali Rastogi

The firm has embraced the domestic side of its employees, which has been normalized within the office.

Grocery deliveries are collected at the reception, which then delivers them to the employee's desk. During festivals like Karva Chauth, all employees come to the office in Indian attire- we call the mehendi artists- work continues while the staff is simultaneously getting their mehendi done. The things that women would hesitate to speak of in the open, we have incorporated them. We cannot behave like they do not exist. So, we (Sonali and Manit) talk about these things and enact them through policy, not behaviour.

Sonali Rastogi

Morphogenesis promotes a gender-inclusive workspace, but it has lost projects, possibly due to subtle hints of gender bias.

We've both lost projects, not necessarily and explicitly for gender-related reasons. It could be Manit pitching for an interior design or a residential project and failing to convince the client. Or maybe, us bagging a project because he represented us.

Sonali Rastogi

For Sonali, a collaborative approach is a part and parcel of putting their best foot forward to get a project.

We put the best foot forward at every stage, so why not put the best foot forward to get the project? We ought to put ourselves in a position of power at all times- and this position is whatever it takes to get the project. If showing two male faces could get the project, why step back?

Sonali Rastogi

Today, after nearly 30 years of practising as an architect, Sonali believes her experience and brand support her. But, based on her initial encounters with gender-defined societal roles, Morphogenesis had decided to put weightage on their values, design philosophy and timely delivery. The quality of the work would discourage the client from emphasizing the gender of the project leads.

About 5-6 years ago, there was a phase in Morphogenesis where the leadership dealing with developers had 60% females. It was not by plan- people learn through the process. Today, our regular clients are unbothered by the gender leading the project. Perhaps, initially, they would hesitate.

Sonali Rastogi

But, in the outside world, societal conditions discourage females from continuing with their careers. According to Sonali, the biggest hurdle in bridging the gap between the number of female architecture students and practising female architects is societal training and a lack of support systems within families.

In India, we are better off than anywhere else- we have familial support systems and unskilled labour willing to work. We can have full-time domestic help. But, the management of these resources is not shared between the man and the woman. In our system, the male has no burden.

Sonali Rastogi

Another concern for females is their safety, especially in metropolitan cities like Delhi. With the belief that the employer must ensure workplace security, Morphogenesis has policies concerning female safety- such as office cars dropping them home after 9 pm, in the absence of personal means of transportation.

Since its establishment, Morphogenesis has ensured a higher percentage of women employees. We have some checks and balances, but every woman has to watch out for her safety. If an employee feels insecure travelling to a particular site, she has to take it up with HR. These are surmountable situations.

Sonali Rastogi

Another discouraging factor she points out is the salary of an architect.

We are poorly paid and have no regulations for the minimum fee an architect should charge. Starting salary in architecture is a small amount of money. This leads to switching firms in the early stage; In my reading, it happens to women due to family or moving post-marriage. So it is a combination of society's regulatory and support systems.

Sonali Rastogi

While architects usually start with a low starting salary, she points out one misconception – the belief that pay parity is better in the West than in India. Referring to the statistics, Sonali states that India has better pay parity than the West- where it is common for different genders to have different joining salaries in the same office.

On working with non-cis genders

Drifting away from the binary terms, we asked Sonali about her experience working with people who do not identify as cis-gender. While she mentions that she has had no experience interacting with a non-cis person, she delineates her perspective of work being separate from gender.

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Like Sonali, most people within the profession have only interacted with cis-males and females. This lack of representation has made it difficult to accommodate all genders.

It has nothing to do with architecture; it has to do with society at large. Our next generation is more aware.

Sonali Rastogi

For herself, speaking of hypothetical interactions with a person not identifying with a cis-gender, she says,

I am very open. While my vocabulary is conditioned for binary genders, I will ensure that the other person is aware of my intention of not wanting to affect them.

Sonali Rastogi

As an employer, Sonali believes in treating her employees as mature adults who do not seek a teacher in her. Every six months, Morphogenesis conducts a class/workshop on workplace harassment. She credits the PoSH (Prevention of Sexual Harassment) at Workplace Act of India for delineating workplace harassment and explaining the handling process well.

To accommodate non-cisgender employees, her solution is to enact policies as required. She believes with increased representation, mandatory policies like PoSH will come into force to make workplaces more gender-inclusive.

These policies are to be enacted and engrained from the school level itself- it's at the kindergarten age when people start understanding their gender.

Sonali Rastogi

At the academic level, representation as basic as ensuring the entry forms of every institute has inclusive gender options is the starting point. In India, according to the Council of Architecture's data, three students identifying as trans graduated between 2016 and 2021. This data might still be a decent percentage if considered along with the number of trans people who finished school.

Once in the professional world, Sonali believes sensitivity should be accounted for from both sides as this is a new phenomenon for the binary-centric world. She states that the non-cis genders need to be

patient as the world tries to unlearn and relearn to accommodate them.

Promoting Representation of Females

For the societal pressures that females continue to face, she points out the need to recognise societal limitations and make our system inclusive. She restates the need to increase an architect's pay, pointing out that nothing works if the payback is not balanced.

The architectural practising norm- from how architects are paid to understanding society and pressures that make women leave should be re-evaluated. When a female employee leaves after giving years, it impacts the firm. Today, it's more impactful than before because 70% of architects are women. Despite this number, when they leave the profession for gender-cited reasons, it creates hesitancy in hiring more women.

Sonali Rastogi

Pointing out that gender discussions are humiliating, Sonali believes that gender should not be a criterion for work and policies. But unfortunately, this mindset is not shared by the majority of professionals, who knowingly or unknowingly continue to contribute towards gender bias and disparity. The outside world continues to encourage an environment practising gender disparity.

It does. I hope this changes.

Sonali Rastogi

♥ Gender Parity, Morphogenesis, New Delhi, Sonali Rastogi, Thoughts



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[Profile and Contributions](#)
