



The Working Conditions of Construction Labourers (Women) in Ghaziabad District

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Abstract

The paper analyses the working conditions of construction labourers especially women labours of the Ghaziabad District, India. This study undertakes a survey of women construction labourers employed in various private as well as public projects in order to understand and collect data regarding their working conditions, socio economic status, safety and health and other aspects related to their work. By challenging their discursive construction as 'unskilled' they negotiate and interrupt the power structures or what Ong (1991: 297) calls 'expand the space of political struggle in their everyday lives'. Here in the narrative of women's acceptance of low wages and worse conditions of work one can see the gendered construction of women as 'cheap' and 'docile' constituting their identities as secondary workers. However, there were several instances of women's resistance which represent disruptions to their constitution as secondary workers. This also clearly demonstrates the fragility of the boundaries of the GDL which need to be guarded by male workers as well to maintain the fiction of men as skilled and women as unskilled workers. Women work as unskilled labour and face several other difficulties in comparison to males. Sexual harassment, gender biasness, wage discrimination are the major factor due to which the working environment becomes difficult for them in the industry and women's are remains at same level of skill even after working few number of years.

Key words: SEWA, WIEGO, ILO

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1. INTRODUCTION

The construction sector is the second largest and fastest growing sector in India, growing at an annual rate of 10 percent in the last five years. It is the largest employer of labour, employing close to 35 million people, half of whom are women. Women workers are almost exclusively unskilled, casual, manual labourers engaged in carrying bricks, cement, sand and water or digging earth, mixing cement or breaking stones. These women form a large part of the unorganized sector which constitutes to about 93 percent of the workforce in India. Though the contribution of this sector towards the economy is considerably greater, the working conditions, remuneration and living standards are worse than their counterpart in the organized sector.

Women occupy an extremely disadvantageous position in our modern society. They are the victims of multiple forms of oppression due to their gender. Most women have to work due to economic compulsion and prefer to go for temporary and stand by jobs because of the hesitancy shown by prospective employers, to employ women in regular jobs and provide them with good working conditions. So from road construction crews to domestic help, they work long hours for less than the minimum wage, receive no compensation for work-related injuries; and have no social security. Despite the existence of various constitutional and legal provisions guarding women in employment, particularly in the unorganized sector, they suffer from various disadvantages in their working lives. The benefits of labour laws have not covered these women workers in many crucial areas especially health, maternity and social security. The construction sector which employs largest number of women after the agriculture sector is the oldest activity undertaken by man and it is a male dominated field. Because of high degree of dependence of women on their men counterparts they suffer from various forms of discrimination and exploitation.

2. OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

Women in informal sector suffer from long hours of work, unsatisfactory working conditions, health hazards, lack of job security and social security benefits. The organized sector takes advantage of this vulnerable position of the labour force in the informal sector and large industries are now finding it advantageous to decentralize production to make use of works in the informal sector.

Annette Barnabas (2011) studied the prospects of women construction workers in Tamil Nadu, South India. Her comparative study aimed to determine the factors that contribute to the gender discrimination and exploitation of women in this sector and suggest ways to empower them and improve their working conditions. The paper first examines the socio-demographic profile of the workers and then proceeds to investigate the working conditions, wage discrimination and opportunities for promotion available for women in the city of Thirucharipalli in the construction sector. A total of 440 women and 440 men were studied. The study revealed that there was low awareness among women regarding the discrimination existent in the sector. The paper concludes with remedial measures that can be taken to improve the overall condition of the women involved in construction industry.

Annette Barnabas; Anbarasu D, Joseph; Clifford Paul S(2009) made study entitled "a study on the empowerment of women construction workers as Masons in Tamil Nadu India", they examined the career progress of 440 men and 440 women construction workers and 51 building

contractors to find out the reasons why women in the construction sector were not able to acquire skills for masonry work and how they could be trained to become masons. The findings of the study show that there is an inherent gender bias against women and also the shared general belief that women construction worker are unfit to be trained informally like men in the construction sector even though they have the necessary skills, capability and desire to become masons. Though the contractors are willing to accept women as masons by giving them training and placement in the construction sector, it has been found, the social forces that have perpetuated the concept of women as inferior workers are inimical to any such move. This study also analyses the methodology of training offered to men in the construction sector in India and proposes a new methodology of training that would qualify women construction workers to become masons and empower them economically.

Bipasha Baruha (2010) in her article "Opportunities and constraints faced by women in the construction industry in India" identifies the opportunities and constraints faced by female construction workers in urban India through empirical research conducted in the city of Ahmedabad. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) conducted two surveys in 1998 and 2003 to understand the needs and priorities of construction workers in the context of economic globalization. A third survey was conducted in 2007 to assess the impacts of construction training programs conducted by the SEWA Housing Trust. The survey of around 193 trained women revealed that they worked for more days, received higher incomes, were being hired as masons, were better equipped to do any kind of work related to construction and there was a change in the behavior of the contractors towards them. While enthusiastically endorsing the role that training and certification can play in providing skilled women with quality employment opportunities, the author emphasizes the need for wider policy intervention at the state and national level to ensure that such programs have replicable, sustainable, and gender-equitable results.

Anu Rai and Prof Ashish Sarkar (2012) in their investigation into the "Workplace culture and status of women construction labourers: A case study in Kolkatta, West Bengal" found that 80% of the respondents reported lack of proper facility of drinking water, sanitation and absence of any kind of maternity leave and benefits. About 92% of the respondents reported that they were cheated by their contractors on the day of payment of salary, there was delay in payment of salary and also there existed wage differentials among the female workers. The study also reports that there are some serious health and safety problems unique to female construction workers but fails to mention what these problems are. With regard to sexual harassment at work place 72% of the respondents reported that they were exploited sexually and only 18.92% reported the incidents to higher authorities but only received negative response. Nearly 60% women respondents mentioned accidents did take place but the help received depended upon the nature of the supervisor or the contractor. About 82% women construction workers reported dissatisfaction with their work and 60% said they would leave the sector if given an opportunity elsewhere. For reasons to enter into this sector, 42% women said they had no other options as they had been abandoned or widowed or were the sole bread winners of their house. Poverty was mentioned as another cause, while few others mentioned for improvement of their economic status and some others as a help to their family members who were already into the construction sector. Many of

these women do not have an identity card, ration card or birth certificates, are illiterate, do not own a house or have a proper diet, cultivate ill habits such as bidi smoking, chewing paan and consumption of alcohol. In response to question as to what the women want from the government, the report further stated that they demanded for descent work, women friendly environment, relief from exploitation, better conditions at workplace. The paper concludes with suggestions such as persona and economic empowerment of these by making them aware of all the provisions made available for them by the government, by removing occupational immobilization through training them for masonry work and other construction related skills and also to provide for the retiring older women with other income generating opportunities.

Joseph Anbarasu and Annette B. (2010) in their paper "A study on attitudinal and human resource practices in empowerment of women construction workers" have attempted to determine the type of women who are willing to be trained and work as masons besides determining the factors that affect the wages of men and women construction workers. The study also examines the attitudes of women and men construction workers towards the elevation of women to higher jobs in construction work itself. The study found that masons receive significantly higher wages than others. Women construction workers working in urban areas are paid more than their counterparts in rural areas and those who are sole earning members receive higher wages than those who are not. Literacy and experience have no significant effect on the wages of women construction workers. While men are paid differently for different job titles women have only one job title and that of an unskilled worker. The study also revealed that among the different job titles of men construction workers, it is found that more *periyal*, *manvettial* (soil digger) and *chithal* are willing to accept and employ women skilled mason when compared to masons. More men who are immigrants are willing to accept and employ women skilled mason. Masons working in urban areas are more willing to accept and employ women as masons when compared to men working in rural areas (odds ratio is 4.632). Men whose wives are not working and working in other jobs are more willing to accept women masons when compared to those whose wives are working in construction. Those masons who came to construction work because of lack of other means of employment or those forced by poverty, are willing to train women as masons. Men whose family members are in this job or have chosen construction field on their own, are less inclined to accept women masons. As wage increases, willingness to accept and employ women as masons also increases.

Santhosh Nandal's study (2006) reiterated the major findings of other studies mentioned above. Two findings stood out in significance: Decision making and Indebtedness. Of the 528 women construction workers interviewed 81.86 % women had reported indebtedness and in 204 cases men took decisions in the house. Decision making is an important deciding factor when it comes to the status of women in the household.

The study by **Habitat (1997)** "Women Constructing Their Lives: Women Construction Workers - Four Evaluative Case Studies"-gives four case studies, from India, Mexico, Ghana and Jamaica. The study states that several stereotypes exist about women and houses. In many cultures, women's primary role is considered to be that of child bearers and homemakers. From the four cases, the sharpest differentiation of tasks along gender lines was found to be in India. Women in

India are not considered fit for skilled work, so that even when they do master such skills, they don't find work because they are simply not considered.

In their article "Liberalization and the women worker", Renana Jhabval and Shalini Sinha have stated that with the prevailing WTO regime in Construction, there is an increase in entry of foreign companies into the construction industry facilitating large scale mechanization of this sector, the result of which could be elimination of women from this sector as they are largely employed as unskilled casual labourers. Though there will be increase in demand for skilled labourers such as masons, tile fitters, painters, plumbers etc women hardly comprise of this skilled force.

Thus it is evident from the above literature that women construction workers are plagued by many problems. Studies in Haryana, Kolkata and Ahmadabad have thrown light on the kinds of problems faced by these women. Our research aims to answer these and other questions specially with reference to Ghaziabad District.

3. WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

When it comes to female employment, however, the trends revealed by statistical analysis are more mixed.

Public sector employment and Private sector employment of women in construction industry (in thousands)

Year	1991	2000	2011
Public sector	55.3	63.2	70.4
Private	6	4	2

There have been some attempts to measure the intensity of work done by women in construction work the status of women workers in the construction by industry National Commission for Women, New Delhi as under:

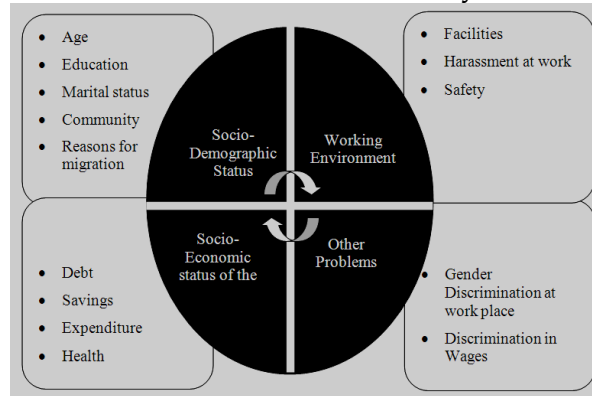
- In concreting, it was found that in 15 minutes, about 55 bundles, each weighing 7-8 kg, passed through the hands of women. In an 8-hour shift, therefore, an incredible 32,000 kg. Would have passed through a woman worker's hands.
- For masonry work, women carried 9-12 bricks (each weighing 2.5 kg) on their head and moved with grace and skill along the scaffolding. While doing earth work women carried on their head 15 kg. of mud and walked 30 feet to deposit the mud and return. In an hour this was repeated 180 times. In an 8-hour shift a woman on average would have walked about 13 kms carrying about 21000 kg. of mud.
- While using a crowbar to dig into the earth, women would do this 15 times a minute, matching the efficiency of able bodied men.
- In curing, women were found carrying water in pots each weighing 8 kg., 15 times per hour to pour over concrete structures.
- In breaking Jallis, women used an iron hammer 52 times per minute and went on doing this for a 9-hour shift with a one hour break in between. (Girija and Geetha 1989)

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: DURING FINANCIAL YEAR 2015-16

According to the NREGA there is only 75 person days Rajapur Block of Ghaziabad, employment generated in district were estimated in Rajapur block in Ghaziabad District for women

construction worker. Ghaziabad district is one of the fastest growing industrial areas in Uttar Pradesh, one of the largest corporation and near to Delhi. The construction activity in the area attracts larger number of migrant workers and they get higher daily wages than their counter parts who work in agriculture and allied activities

Working Condition of Women Construction Workers – A Layout



A. Social-Demographic Status of Women Construction Workers:

- **Age:** According to collected data of construction women worker age is about 25 years.
- **Education:** Women workers is not more educate because they have no more source to aware for education.
- **Marital status:** Most of them are married.
- **Community:** OBC, SC, ST and very least is from General community.
- **Reasons for migration:** For getting physical labour work.

Based on three surveys of Ghaziabad region the picture emerges about women construction workers and their social context comes out as, Harijans and tribals are the largest groups represented, although they comprise only 15 percent and 5 percent of the Indian population respectively. It is apparent that the rural groups most likely to migrate in search of work are those who own the least land or are landless labourers SC and ST are the largest landless groups in rural India, they also lacks the skills as well other education. The construction Industry is well suited for them according to their status, so they are likely to comprise a significant section of construction workers. Ninety-six percent of the construction workers in Delhi are Harijan migrant labourers from Rajasthan; Harijans and tribals together comprised 90 percent of the Andhra sample, most of the women are young (average age 25) having joined the workforce before they reached their teens. Almost all are illiterate in Construction Work. In .Women and Work: Continuity and Change. Edited by Lebra, Paulson, Everett, Promilla & Co, 1984). Demographic picture has changed somewhat, with, for instance, more construction workers coming to Delhi from other states, comprising of scheduled Castes and Tribes.

B. Working Environment at Work Place:

1. Facilities

- (a) Feeding facilities in or near the undertaking;

- (b) Rest facilities in or near the undertaking and recreation facilities excluding holiday facilities; and
- (c) Transportation facilities to and from work where ordinary public transport is inadequate or impracticable,

We recommend that the following provisions should be applied as fully and as rapidly as national conditions allow, by voluntary, governmental or other appropriate action, and that each Member should report to the International Labour Office as requested by the Governing Body concerning the measures taken to give effect thereto.

There is lack of proper facility of drinking water, sanitation and absence of any kind of maternity leave and benefits. Nearly 92% of the respondents reported that they were cheated by their contractors on the day of payment of salary, there was delay in payment of salary and also there existed wage differentials among the female workers. It was also found that there are some serious health and safety problems unique to female construction workers but fails to mention what these problems are. With regard to sexual harassment at work place 72% of the respondents reported that they were exploited sexually and only 18.92% reported the incidents to higher authorities but only received negative response.

2. Harassment at Work Place

Sexual harassment is a serious problem for female construction workers. About 74 per cent of the respondents reported sexual harassment at work place. Studies also revealed that insecure nature of employment, particularly for women, creates a vicious trap in which women are forced to please a sub-contractor in order to get work. It is evident that the overwhelming majority of women in the industry are young, being between the ages of 16-40 years. A survey conducted in Ghaziabad reported that of the respondents (55.00%) were in the age group of 21-30 years, followed by 37.50 percent who were of 31-40 years. Most of the workers are married. Women of these age group have the capacity to do hard work and easily harassed by the contractor. Thekedars and employers usually prefer to employ younger women whom they may exploit sexually. An extremity of demands of thekedars (contractors) can be estimated from the fact that to get employment, some of the older age workers force other poor young girls to please contractors; as in turn contractors has promised her to provide regular employment opportunity and 20 per cent extra commission on her wage for next whole year. Some reports state that they are exploited by thekedars both sexually as well as economically, many times such they face desertion of their own spouses and ultimately the loose the jobs.

Findings further noticed that despite the prevalence of such harsh and hostile work culture, low level of job satisfaction and unhealthy job relationship, construction industry overwhelmingly attract female labourers next only to agricultural sector. On the question why despite, such a hostile workplace, a large number of womenfolk take job at sit?

There are several factors responsible for that, some of the factors are identified by the researchers in past which are family income, self motives, social forces, season etc. The findings reveal that about 46% of respondents reported that they do not have any other option, as they are widows or abandoned their husband, or if husband is there, he is either drunkard or unemployed, therefore, to meet the dire needs of family and to support children they have to take job at site. Another group (4%) is forced by poverty while 10per cent are working to improve their economic status or

helping other existing members of family in construction industry. Only 4% of the female workers join the jobs at their own choice. It is largely noticed that on one hand where this womenfolk lack any particular skill, on another they are forced to work in unfavorable situations.

A. Safety

The primary objectives of SAFEWORK are:

1. To create worldwide awareness of the dimensions and consequences of work-related accidents, injuries and diseases.
2. To promote the goal of basic protection for all workers in conformity with international labour law.
3. To enhance the capacity of ILO member States and industry to design and implement effective preventive and protective policies and programmes.

B. Socio-Economic Status of the Construction Women Workers:

- **Debt**
- **Saving**
- **Expenditure**
- **Health**

The women workers at certain points were going through a number of job stresses like Transmitted Diseases. Specifically targeting to female construction workers, the impact of specific job stressors on women in the construction industry and the job stressors examined, were classified into areas of "Job/Task Demand", "Organizational Factors" and "Physical Conditions. Female construction workers differ from female workers in most other industries because their work setting is non-traditional. Therefore, in addition to the effects of classic job stressors that have been studied in women working in traditional jobs, there is possibility of very different perceptions of dominant job stressors and their levels of effect by female construction workers. It was also found that skill underutilization as well as having to over-compensate to prove oneself on the job was associated with psychological symptoms. While support from co-workers and supervisors did not moderate the association between control and gender based harassment and discrimination, it did have a significant effect of job satisfaction.

D. Other

- **Gender Discrimination at work place:** Sector Women constitute half of the construction workers in India as semi-skilled/skilled jobs in other industries but in the construction industry, women are employed mostly as unskilled labourers. They perform various unskilled jobs in the industry like cleaning building sites, carrying bricks, gravel, mortar and water up to the skilled carpenters and masons, irrespective of the number of years they worked, they are not upgraded from unskilled to skilled as males. This mindset has led to gender discrimination in this sector for work allocation and wage distribution (**Suchitra and Rajshekhhar, 2006**). Such anti-women attitudes and discrimination further complicate the workplace culture of these women labour. They live very tough life and do not enjoy equality of status and social justice for which they actually deserve.
- **Discrimination wages:** Government fixed the wages for the unskilled and skilled labours for the public sector unit as well as the private sector on the basis of work performed in terms of hours. But unfortunately the industry works as in form of contract which provide the cost

saving for government which ultimately offer opportunity to the contractors to negotiate the wages. Males who are unskilled and skilled negotiate higher than female indicating gender biasness. The previous surveys conducted in various parts of the country throw light on this fact, some of them are as, Sixty percent of the women earn wages between Rs 61 and 70 per day (Delhi). Women construction workers said there was discrimination in wages, with the contractors paying them Rs 80 per day while paying men Rs 100 per day (Mumbai). At the end of a day's work, men get paid Rs 60-70 but women get only Rs 30-40. (Patna). Women face discrimination on the job because even if they have the same skills as the men they are not given the same work. Thekedars act tough and do not pay wages regularly, handing out only enough for daily expenses and commuting. It is not safe for women to stand for a couple of hours at the naka. Thekedars and others eye them, harass them. Sexual harassment is a serious problem for female construction workers.

5. CONCLUSION

At all the five Public Hearings and in reply to questionnaires where they were asked what they wanted from the government and society, women construction workers said they wanted the society and the government to ensure regular decent Work for themselves and their husbands, Education for their children and pucca housing for their families. They wanted minimum wages and equal remuneration.

These are the basic needs that all aspire today and that a government pledged to democracy and social justice must strive earnestly to provide.

In India as the literacy level among women is increasing, but still the gender biasness is a crucial factor for the discrimination which starts from the house when the girl is born and continues in each stage of life. In India a large group of female unskilled worker works in the rural area as agriculture labourer as soon as the season ends, they shift to the construction industry which increases their employment level in the industry by doing so they support to their husband in income generation, for meeting their house hold expenditure. Most of them belong to the migrant families, their family members also create obstacle for them due to lack of education. Males are drunkards which make difficulty in meeting their expenditures. Their job is not easy, within the industry as they have to face several adverse situations such like sexual harassment, wages discriminations injuries and deceases are the major factors due to which women's even though works hard, but lag behinds the men and remains unskilled even after hardship a lot of years. The scenario only can be changed with the government intervention, by implementing the policies strictly. The contractors should be cheked from time to time. Stem action has to be taken against all those who harasses the employees. The status of the women only can be improved when major transition in the society occurs and that can be achieved by mind set transition.

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