

The Role of Migrant Construction Workers in India: An Overview

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Abstract

In India construction workers constitute a major portion in the work force of the construction industry. India's three crores construction workers are literally the builders of modern India but still, this industry is recognized as the unorganized sector with vast labor intensity and economic activity after agriculture in India. Construction workers are the backbone of the economy as they create the infrastructure necessary for industrial growth. It is well known that the working and living conditions of construction workers are appalling. At various stages, specific enquiries have been held in the conditions of construction workers and suitable recommendations and enactments of legislations have also been made. Construction, which was one of the worst-hit sectors during the pandemic, is also one of the key sectors in which India's migrant workforce find employment. The NSSO (2016-17) puts the number of construction workers in the country at over 74 million¹.

Interstate migrant workers make 35.4 per cent of all the construction workers in the country's urban areas, according to the 2001 Census. Of all the interstate migrants in India who move out of the farm sector, construction absorbs around 9.8 per cent, making it the second most preferred sector for migrant workers after retail. Both migrants and non-migrants in the construction sector are largely informally employed, with about 90% of migrants in rural areas and 67% in urban areas working as casual wage laborers. Migrant construction workers are mainly unskilled seasonal migrants who work as wage laborers in the agrarian sector. The remittances sent by migrant workers, accounting for a significant share in foreign exchange earnings of nations and GDP growth, contribute significantly to the economic betterment of migrants' families. They also act as the engine of economic growth of many developing countries. Out-migration makes a significant contribution to reducing unemployment and underemployment in labour-sending countries. Unlike the economic benefits of out-migration, the social costs are too often relatively high and migrant workers are reportedly exposed to various exploitative situations at workplaces in labour-receiving countries². The promotion of labour migration and protection of labour and human rights of migrant workers has been a matter of concern for the ILO since its establishment in 1919. In view of this, the research analysis is made in this present paper about the economic consequences and social and welfare aspects of migrant workers in India.

Keywords: migrant workers, construction, human rights, unskilled, unorganized.

¹ <https://apmigration.ilo.org/news/india2019s-migrant-construction-workers-an-analysis-of-their-welfare-framework>

² Pong-Sul Ahn "Migrant Workers and Human Rights Out-Migration from South Asia", ILO, 2004

1. Introduction

Modernization and industrialization have paved a good way to the construction industry. Small towns and cities become more urbanized and the construction sector too has got a boost. Irrespective of occasional slumps in the economy or in construction works, the sector is going through a faster growth. In a globalizing economy, it is they who are constructing the new economic zones, the IT cities, the call centers and mega malls that are creating new forms of wealth today; it is these construction workers who are laying the cables for a rapidly expanding country-wide telecommunications network. Yet these workers, who are creating the base of the new economy, themselves live in a time warp, trapped in low skilled, low paid, insecure working conditions, bound by feudal working relationships, often literally in bondage. Apart from old/ traditional urban/ industrial centers, new industrial/urban centers have appeared on the map where construction works are going on a large scale expanding and fast growing construction sector and, in general, lack of greater employment opportunity elsewhere has drawn large numbers of workers in this sector. The building and construction sector is employing a large number of workers. There are more than 20 million of construction workers³ including both men and women and also child laborers in India at present.

Generally, women construction workers are deeply concerned about conditions of work in this sector. Pay inequalities, blocked opportunities of advancement for want of skill, frequent relocation, lack of freedom to plan their work, hard and long working hours and coping with multiple roles result in a high level of stress. It generates attitudes of passive acceptance of helplessness and misery and conformity, rather than reaction. It is estimated that the percentage of women in the construction industry is 30-40⁴.

Construction laborers are laborers who are migrating from different regions and states leaving their native villages in search of the daily job⁵. These people in general are nomadic in their life and usually do not return to their birthplace or natives. They travel from one area of work to another area along with their families and live in a place, which is either provided by the owner of the construction company or somewhere nearby, building temporary shelters. They have maximum mobility because of the nature of their work. These laborers are engaged in huge industrial constructions, residential flat constructions, city beautification works, these construction laborers, as a part of unorganized work force remain the most exploited ones even after five decades of independence. In the recent past the trend shows that all big cities of country have become the centers to recruit casual laborers as construction laborers to cities and urban areas. Most of the construction laborers migrate to cities and metros are from poor families and are illiterate⁶. Their lack of education and skill make their choice very limited. When they come to big cities, they have to face a number of problems because of their inexperience and lack of skill. They become easy victims of exploitation and have to work for their day to day sustenance.

³ For more details see Report on Social Security for Unorganized Workers, National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS), Government of India, New Delhi. 2006

⁴ A.P. Verma, “*Women Labour in India – A Comprehensive Manual*,” 1st edition, 1996, Pub. V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, Noida, p. 4

⁵ Kundu.A, “*Migration, urbanisation & interregional inequality: the emerging socio-political challenge*” Economic and Political Weekly, 21(46), 1986, p.2005-8

⁶ Ramaswamy E. A., “*Organized Labour and Economic Reforms*”, Indian Journal of Labour Economics, Vol:39, No:2, April-June 1996, PP-438 to 439.

Being migrants, they don't get registered and hence are denied basic governmental facilities⁷. In the construction field migratory pattern within India, women and children have always featured as "associated" migrants⁸ with the main decision to migrate being taken by the male of the household. As an associated migrant, women are more vulnerable due to reduced economic choices and lack of social support in the new area of destination.

Objectives of the study:

1. To analyze the socio-economic status of women construction workers in the study area.
2. To analyze the working conditions of women workers in study area.
3. To find out major findings of the study area.
4. To suggest the policy recommendations for uplift socio-economic status of women in construction industry.

Data and Methodology:

Primary data for the study were collected from a random sample of 300 women construction workers in Devanahalli Taluk of Bangalore urban and rural district in Karnataka.

The objectives for the study are pursued using simple averages and percentages.

Women in Construction Sector:

Construction workers are the backbone of the economy as they create the infrastructure necessary for industrial growth. India's three crores construction workers are literally the builders of modern India. Construction sector⁹ is the largest employer in the world and in India. More than 31 million people work in the construction industry, second only agricultural sector. More than 35 percent of construction workers are women and they get poor remuneration and are discriminated in the payment of wages¹⁰. When men construction workers have promotional opportunities, women have no opportunities to acquire skills and become masons or supervisors. About one-third of these workers are women and children. Women are almost unskilled laborers they face serious problems related to work, viz., wage discrimination, gender and sexual harassment, unhealthy job relationship, lower wages, etc. Despite all these, construction industry overwhelmingly attracts female workers. Their skills are always at the same level and are not upgraded as they assist only the male work fare the workplace. Their husbands are often drunkards or are found to have other sexual partners and find themselves in debt trap; due to these factors women are unable to strengthen their skills and economic position in the industry. The female employment in the construction industry is very high, even though they work only as the helpers or unskilled workers. As stated in India women workers constitute a major portion in the work force of the construction industry. While on the other hand women construction workers start as unskilled helpers and remain unskilled throughout their life and as a result are victims of gender discrimination. In addition to this, they are also unorganized and

⁷ Ramesh PB, "Rethinking Social Protection for India's Working Poor in the Unorganized Sector, Cross National Policy Exchange", Asia Social Protection Papers. 2009, pp1–18.

⁸ Biswas, A R, "Can migration change a person's status", Journal of Indian Law Institute, Vol 38, No. 1, Jan- March 1996, p 58

⁹ Anand, Vijayanta, "Advocating for the Rights of Construction Workers: Nirman's Experience", The Indian Journal of Social Working, Vol. 59, No.3. 1998 p-18

¹⁰ International Labour Organisation Report, 2009

dependent on their husbands without any empowerment socially and economically. Un-fortunately, in this system, women workers do not have an opportunity to receive any type of skills training which has left them stagnant with-out any chance of promotion or upgrade of any sort in their job. Most of the time, based on the mistaken notion that women are incapable of doing heavy or rough work, women workers loose out miserably, this type of attitude has left the women workers at the bottom of the rung of skills in the industry with no avenues of promotion or higher wages for them.

Construction workers in general have no access to formal training in the construction industry and they upgrade their skills thorough practice or by observing and working under skilled masons or carpenters etc. As a result of women being only engaged in soft skills, the gap between the skilled male workers and unskilled women workers has placed them in a position of less empowerment economically and socially. This has worked against the advancement and empowerment of women workers.¹¹ The situation of India is ridden with paradoxes. Women form the poorest of the poor and yet women have run empires and states on the sub- continent. Women are the harder race with a higher life expectancy and yet have an unfavorable sex ratio. These should be treated as paradoxes and not as indicators and averages. Women form 89.0 percent of the informal and unorganized sector. Women's work participation rate is higher in the rural areas, 90.0 percent of the rural and 10.0 percent of the urban women workers are unskilled.¹²

Role of Women in Economic Development

In the traditional society of India, woman was fully occupied with her duties as a mother and homemaker, which are termed as non-market labor. This was so small feet, since the traditional household may be described as both a production and a consumption unit. Many factors like urbanization technical progress and education have profoundly changed these traditional conditions in India. Slowly starting from the metropolitan areas, the role of woman at home has become lighter due to technical progress. The production side of women's work at home is gradually decreasing leading to a reduction of their role at home. Women constitute half of the nation's human resource and therefore vital and crucial for the national development. In the socio-economic milieu of the country, role of women within the overall context of human resource development requires their rightful role in the society; in any society, economic position and social status of women are influenced by the extent of their involvement in income earning activities outside the household.¹³

Sharing of economic activity by women is neither a new phenomenon nor a new development. The magnitude of their involvement however, is co-related socio economic and political conditions prevalent in a country. From time immemorial, women in India have been working in the active economic field and indirectly contribute to the economic development. With the changes in the outlook, attitudes and approach towards living, it has now become necessary, by and large, for the families of inadequate income to supplement their requirements through traditional earnings. Women, of course, can fill this gap. Breaking social conventions and religious taboos, they have come forward to meet the challenges enthusiastically. This is, no doubt a healthy development. However, in a country like India, the process of

¹¹ Chakrabarti D, "Indian Construction Industry and Workers", Construction Workers Federation of India. 2005, p-81.

¹² Srinivasan, M.V. "Women Workers in Unorganised Sector", Women's Link, 2000, Vol. 6, No.4.

¹³ Neetha, N., "Making of Female Breadwinners Migration and Social Networking of Women Domestic in Delhi", .Economic and Political Weekly April 24, 2004, pp1681-1688.

development is bound to be little slow owed to the prevalent illiteracy and age old rigid customs and traditions.

The Human Development Report for 2010, published by United Nations Development Program presents a gloomy picture of the status of women in the world. The most striking point is that there is not a single country where women enjoy equality with men. Women perform 11 trillion worth of unpaid or invisible economic activity worldwide. According to the findings of a 31 country study, women work longer hours than men. On an average, women put in 13.0 percent more times than men in developing countries and 6.0 percent more than men in developed countries. Another finding was that of the total burden of the work, women carry, 53.0 percent and men carry 47.0 per cent in developing countries and the figures of 51.0 percent and 49.0 percent for developed economies¹⁴.

The discriminatory approach towards women has still deep rooted in our society, even though our constitution guarantees them an equal rights and status, we have failed to recognize the extensive contribution of women to household and national economy as active workers, and producers of goods and services. Sex difference is linked with un-equal distribution of resources towards rights and responsibilities. The status of women in a society is usually measured in terms of the level of education, employment, income, health as well as role played by them in the family, community and society.

Labour and Human Rights

Social security is a fundamental right of labour which is guaranteed by law to all human beings, who live their own labour and who find themselves unable to work temporarily or permanently for their control. According to Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, every member of society has a right to social security. The ILO declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work is a major step in this direction. Development must bring about an improvement in the living conditions of people. It should, therefore, ensure the provision of basic human needs at all. According to the ILO, construction jobs in most countries are undertaken almost exclusively by men. However, in the countries of South Asia women play an important role which consists of performing unskilled tasks for low pay. For example, in India it is estimated that up to 30 per cent of the construction workforce are women. They are integrated into the building workforce at the bottom end of the industry, as unskilled workers or head-load carriers. The International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights of the United Nations is another international instrument bestowing workers with economic social and cultural rights. So that they are enjoying these rights of self –determination can freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. The Indian Constitution (GOI, 1991) provides for citizenship rights in Part-II. Citizenship rights are regarded as fundamental, because they are most essential for the attainment by the individual of his full intellectual moral and spiritual status. The guarantee of the minimum rights at the workplace will enable people to claim and realize a fair share of the wealth. The guarantee of these rights will ensure a process of translating economic growth into social equality. The development thus becomes synonymous with the agenda of integrated development.

¹⁴ National Sample Survey Organisation [NSSO] Employment and Unemployment situation in India 2005-06, 62nd Round, Ministry of Statistics and Programme implementation, Government of India. 2008

According to the Directive Principles of State Policy of the Indian Constitution, the State is required to secure for the citizens, both men and women to right to an adequate means of livelihood, equal pay for equal work for both men and women, protection against abuse and exploitation of worker's, economic necessity, protection of their health and strength, to secure for children opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity and protect children and a youth against exploitation and moral and material abandonment. The state is also required to secure equal justice and free legal aid, to make effective provisions for right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of undeserved want, to ensure just and human conditions of work and maternity relief, to secure work, a living wage and a decent standard of life to participation of workers in the management of industries. According to the Labor and Social Trends in Asia and the Pacific, South Asia's labor force has been growing at a strong annual average of about 2.3 percent¹⁵. However, labor force participation rates of South Asia remain low, compared with other sub regions in Asia and the Pacific women's share in labor force and participation in India is relatively low compared to other countries. At the same time, female unemployment rates are generally much higher than male unemployment rates within the sub region, particularly in countries where female labor force participation is still low.

Women are engaged in a whole range of unskilled work, which though invisible, are unavoidable in the construction activity. They are mostly head-load workers, who carry bricks, cement, sand and water from one place to the other, sometimes over great heights along precariously balanced wooden beams or structures. This exposes them to high risks of accidents as well as physical and mental strain. They are also involved in cleaning up concreting and earth work. In construction industry un-skilled men, as helpers, also do head-load, concreting and earth work, but women are usually paid less than men for equal work.

Table No-01

Frequency table of Types of construction work of the Respondents (Source: Field Survey)

Types of Construction Work	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Shopping Centers	77	25.7	25.7	25.7
Residential Apartments	97	32.3	32.3	58.0
Commercial Apartments /				
Blocks	46	15.3	15.3	73.3
Hotel Construction	10	3.3	3.3	76.7
Governments	37	12.3	12.3	89.0
Administrative Buildings				
Educational Institutions	19	6.3	6.3	95.3

¹⁵ For further details see National Survey Sample Organization (NSSO), GOI 1999-2000.

Pools and Bridges	2	.7	.7	96.0
Temples	10	3.3	3.3	99.3
Infrastructure facility				
Work	2	.7	.7	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

Table No.1 shows the result of Frequency test regarding the type of construction workers. Out of 300 respondents 32.3 percent of the workers working at residential apartment, 25.7 percent of the women workers working at shopping centers, 15.3 percent of the women workers working at commercial apartments, 12.3percent of the women workers working at government administration buildings, 6.3 percent of the women workers working in educational institutions, 3.3percent of the respondents working at construction of hotels and 0.7percent of the respondents are from construction work of pools and bridges and infrastructure facilities. This result reveals that majority of construction activities are building construction like shopping centers, residential apartments, commercial block, government buildings, and educational institutions etc.

Table No-02
Rate of exploitation of women workers in construction Industry

	Nature of work	Actual wages(In Rupees)	Paid wages(In Rupees)	Difference	Rate of Exploitation
	Water Feeding	300	230	70	23.33
	Material Supply	300	250	50	16.66
	Mall Mixing	300	260	40	13.33
	Brick Handling	300	250	50	16.66
	Other	300	250	50	16.66

Source: Field Survey, Discussion with the workers on the site

The table No.02 shows the result of rate of exploitation of women works. Women workers doing the works like water feeding, material supply, mall mixing, brick handling and other work. Actual wages of these works Rs 300 for among the women workers and them get continues work in the work site. But wages are paid Rs 230 per day by contractor. Difference of actual (expected wage) and paid wage to workers is 70 per day. Exploitation rate is 23.33 percent and next is also rate of exploitation by the contractors is 16.66 percent and 13.33 percent in various work among the women construction workers.

This result reveals that the majority of women workers are exploited by contractor in the form of wages. Rate of exploitation is variation according with the nature of work among the women workers. This type of wage exploitation exists in the construction workers; it is because women workers are illiterates, insecurity of job, and discrimination of gender.

Table No-03

Harassment of women workers at the work place

Sl.No	Name of the Harassment	Opinion of the Respondents	Percentage
1	Abused/Scolded	270	90
2	Humiliated	255	85
3	Beaten	50	16.66
4	No Harassment	100	33.33

Source: Field Survey

The table No.3 shows the results type of harassment of women workers. Out of 300 respondents, 90 percent of the respondents are stated abused or scolded by contractor or male workers. Further 85 percent of the respondents humiliated. 16.66 percent of the respondents are stated that beaten by contractor. Remaining 33.33 percent of the women workers stated there is no harassment from work site.

From the above data, we can observe that majority of women workers are harassed by contractor or male workers in the work site in the form of abused, humiliated and beaten. It is because gender discrimination is also in the construction industry, illiteracy, low skills, and no knowledge of legal education of women workers.

Conclusion

Construction industry provides much needed work opportunities for some of the poorest and most marginalized sections of the society. In reality, women are the creators, protectors and destroyers. All the energies of women, their intellect, their strength and their skill are devoted to catering to the needs of men and in India as the literacy level among women is increasing, but still women occupy a disadvantage position in the society hence, we should make them aware of their own potential and generate a desire in them to acquire skills that would enable them to walk shoulder to shoulder with men. Literacy and Education should be given would sharpen women's awareness. Along with this efforts should be made to educate our men folk to treat women as equal partners in progress. A qualitative method is the need of the hour. The Government, Non-Governmental Organization and men folk at large have to play a crucial role in making gender equity reality. Equitable access to resources, power and decision making is of paramount importance. Women should be provided education and training to enhance their sense of self-worth and self-esteem and to enlighten them regarding their right to good health. Therefore a credible employment strategy needs to focus to enhance educational level of the workers, the socio-economic status of the women only can be improved when major transition in the society occurs and that can be achieved by mind set transition. The socio-economic and cultural development must empower women at greater choices and giving in change of their own future and makes them self-reliant and confident.