

## **WOMEN WORKERS IN CONSTRUCTION SECTOR: ISSUES & CHALLENGES (A CASE STUDY OF ODISHA)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The construction sector in India has the largest number of unorganized labourers next to the agricultural industry. The women engaged in this construction sector have no occupational mobility and face problems like wage differential, harassment at workplace, unsafe working condition, no job security, etc. Moreover they have low level of job satisfaction as they are not promoted, do the same strenuous work, and are not paid accordingly. Despite these problems, they continue to work to support their family. The present paper attempts to identify the issues and challenges the women workers face at the workplace.

**Keywords:** Construction workers, unorganized sector, wage differential.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The term Construction workers was defined by K.N. Vaid which referred to all those men and women who are employed by the contractors, builders, owners, Government agencies and other enterprises to perform a various task at a premises where construction and other maintenance works were carried out. Construction sector forms the second largest sector providing employment after agriculture. Due to the nature of work and frequent mobility they are considered to be a migratory group. The construction sector deals with the entire construction process which is lab our intensive and very risky also. The nature of work, supply of labour, skill and the process of wage differentiation altogether determines the entire labour dynamic of the construction sector.

Women workers are equally employed in this sector especially in unskilled category for manual works. They are working at various construction and project sites that are highly dangerous in

nature and thus face several issues and challenges. Their major hardships are related to health, the work-life balance, safety at work. In spite of these constraints, the construction sector engages women workers. They are neither promoted nor their skills are never upgraded and remain as unskilled workers in the construction industry.

Moreover, wage differential has been prevalent in the Indian labour market for many years. It is found to be very dominant in the unorganized sector. Wage differentiation refers to the varying wages rates at different places of work depending upon the type of work and amount of work done. Even though having skills, they are never treated at par with the skilled male workers. Migration is especially higher in the urban areas as they look out for different employment opportunities for their sustenance.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

(Kumar B. Ravi, 2013) in his study of Vijayawada district of Andhra Pradesh tries to identify the gender discrimination by the means of empowering the women construction workers. It highlighted that majority of women workers are illiterate, earning member of their family and belong to lower income families as compared to the male workers. There is prevalence of wage differentials among the workers as well as no promotion in the nature of work which reflects the unskilled nature of work. Therefore, they are unable to upgrade their skills and work as masons. He is of the opinion that if trained properly, the women workers can become competent enough to do other works like that of masons.

A study conducted by (Dileep Kumar M. 2013) in his study of the Construction workers in Pune, Maharashtra concluded that the conditions of the workers are very execrable in nature. Neither the legislations nor the contractors have mercy on this segment of population.

### **Migration & Construction Sector:**

Due to lack of employment, low wage payment impoverished conditions are some of the factors behind the concentration of migrant workers in the cities. These migrant construction workers lead a very miserable life because of the absence of job security as well as opportunity for better jobs.

In India there are 30 million of people are seasonal migrant labourers. Out of that Odisha has 2.5 million are migrant labourers. A total of 1,01,012 labourers from different districts were given permission through 1975 licensed contractors to go outside States for work in 2016. They include highest of 67,137 workers from Balangir district followed by 13,605 from Nuapara, 6827 from Sambalpur, 5026 from Ganjam, 3,173 from Puri and 1153 from Nayagarh district. However, 13 districts Baleswar, Bargarh, Bhadrak, Deogarh, Gajapati, Kalahandi, Kendrapada,

Khordha, Koraput, Rayagada, Subarnapur, Sundargarh and Talcher area of Angul distort was in the list had no workers in the list, according to the information ( Odisha State Migration Profile, July 2014) Bureau. Around 41.79 % of the State's population belongs to workers' class. The State Government has not conducted any survey to know the number of people going to other States in search of work; but gathers information on migrant labourers only through the licensed worker-contractors. Under the Odisha Building and Construction Workers Welfare Board 17,95,145 construction workers have been registered till now.

The migration pattern studied in this paper is predominantly inter-state in nature, which is determined by the fact that 21% of total migrants move within the state to find work. The important destination the coastal region is Bhubaneswar, Khorda. This along with Cuttack and Puri compose of 84% of intra-state migration from different regions. These migrated workers basically work as daily labourers in different construction site. Especially, in the Khorda district they are hired by the contractors from the labour congregation points for daily work with a fixed payment and some other women are hired as domestic help in households (Odisha State Migration Profile, July 2014).

Moreover, the workers are not registered and the absence of documentary evidence restrains them from accessing measures for social security, pension and insurance from the Construction Welfare Board etc. Within a very limited income they don't have any savings, investments and remittance and are also deprived of basic amenities like sanitation, clean drinking water, electricity, shelter and a safe environment. Both the women and children face additional vulnerabilities in relation to health, safety, nutrition and hygiene. Basically, the impact is seen on the children as due to seasonal migration, they are deprived of education, exposed to the risky work environment and significantly limits the overall development of the child disallowing them a better future than their parents. Unfortunately, no attention has been paid to the plight of the migrant workers despite the prevalence of these ubiquitous.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The paper is both descriptive as well as analytical in nature. The field work has been carried out from January to June 2017 in the city of Bhubaneswar, Odisha. Personal interview at the worksite as well as at their home was carried out to fill up the questionnaires and based on the primary data the analytical part has been done.

## **Source of Data**

The present paper is established on the primary data collected through questionnaire and secondary source of data available from various reports, Government publications and websites. On the basis of stratified random sampling 300 unskilled women construction workers were

selected for the study. Personal interviews were conducted at the construction site as well as at their place of residence to fill up the questionnaire.

## Results

The problems and constraints at workplace which affects the women's participation and often leads to discrimination in relation to work and wage have been discussed and the findings are given below.

### I) Socio-economic profile of the respondents

**Table 4.1: Socio - Economic status of workers**

Covariates	%	N
<b>Age of the respondents</b>		
15-20 years	29.7	89
20-25 years	43.0	129
25-30 years	27.3	82
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Currently Married	88.0	264
Unmarried	5.3	16
Widowed/Divorced/Separated	6.7	20
<b>Educational Status</b>		
No formal education	88.3	265
Primary school completed	11.7	35
<b>Caste</b>		
General	60	180
Scheduled Caste	30.7	92
Other Backward Caste	9.3	28
<b>Total dependency load</b>		
One	47.0	141
More than one	53	259
<b>N</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>300</b>

Table 4.1 represents the socio-economic status of the respondents. Among the respondents, (43%) of women belong to the age group of 20-25 years, followed by 15-20 years (29.7%) and 25-30 years (27.3%). Among the respondents, (88.3%) were married followed by widowed/divorced (6.7%) and only (5.3 %) unmarried. The results from educational background shows that (88.3 %) of the respondents had are illiterate who have no formal education followed by (11.7%) who have attained school till completion of primary level. The caste category composition of the sampled respondents shows that (60%) belong to General category followed by Scheduled Caste (30.7 %) and Other Backward Classes (9.3%). The analysis on dependency

rate shows that the respondent have more than two members fully dependent on them (53.0%) in the family followed by (47.0 %) who are having only one member dependent on them. This shows that majority of construction workers' families are women headed household.

## II) Migration profile of the respondents:

**Table 4.2: Migration status of the respondents**

Covariates	%	N
<b>Ever Migrated</b>	83.0	249
<b>Place of Migration</b>		
Native Place	17.0	51
Current Place of Residence	83.0	249
<b>Period of Migration</b>		
6 Months	48.3	145
More than 6 Months	51.7	155
<b>Reason for Migration</b>		
Seasonal employment	39.3	118
Better opportunity	43.7	131
<b>N</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>300</b>

Table 4.2 presents the migration profile of the sampled respondents. Among the respondents, (83 %) of the women construction workers have migrated with family for work and only (17%) of women are staying in their native place. The reasons for migration basically being better opportunity (43.7%) followed by seasonal employment (39.3%).The period of migration shows that around (51.7%) women usually migrate for more than six months followed by (48.3 %) for six months in search of work.

## III) Nature & Duration of Work

**Table 4.3: Nature of work and working hours**

Covariates	%	N
<b>Currently employed as</b>		
Unskilled worker	96.3	289
Skilled Worker	3.7	11
<b>Duration of work</b>		
Less than 1 year	40.7	122
Above 1 year	59.3	178
<b>No. of working days</b>		
15-20	43.7	131
20-25	40.0	120
25-30	16.3	49

<b>Working anywhere before</b>		
Casual labour	65.7	197
Farming	34.3	103
<b>Working at own will</b>		
Yes	81.7	245
No	18.3	55
<b>Forced to work</b>		
By Friends	6.0	18
Family	12.3	37
<b>Accompanied to work by</b>		
Spouse	71.0	213
Friends	29.0	87
<b>N</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>300</b>

Table 4.3 represents the nature and duration of work of the respondents. Among the respondents, (96.3%) of women are currently engaged as unskilled worker whereas only (3.7%) are skilled workers.(Jhabvala & Kambur,2002 ; Baruah, 2008) are of the opinion that even if they have worked for number of years, still they are not promoted from unskilled worker to skilled worker like the male workers. They continue the same monotonous work like carrying bricks, mortar, cleaning building sites, etc. And gradually, this paves the way for discrimination among the male & female workers in terms of allocation of work as well as wage distribution (Suchitra & Rajsekhar, 2006). The above states that (59.3%) of women are engaged in the construction work above one year and (49.7%) women less than one year. Among the respondents (65.7%) of women are working as casual laborers and (34.3%) are farming at their native place before migrating to other places. Moreover,(81.7%) of women have joined the construction sector due to their own interest while only (18.3%) have been forced to work to meet the needs of the family. (12.3%) of the respondents said that they have been forced to join work by the family whereas (6.0%) of the respondents ended up at working at construction site while accompanying their friends to the working site. As the table depicts (71%) of respondents are accompanied by their spouse to the site followed by (29%) of women who are accompanied by their friends.

**IV) Wage Rates & Income of workers****Table 4.4: Wage Rates & Income of workers**

Covariates	%	N
<b>Wage per day</b>		
Rs 200-250	12.0	36
Rs 250-300	88.0	264
<b>Mean Wage</b>	250	300
<b>Monthly income</b>		
Less than 5000	38.3	115
5000-10000	57.0	171
Above 10000	4.7	14
<b>Wage Difference between male &amp; female workers</b>		
Paid same as male workers	21.7	65
Paid less than male workers	78.3	235
<b>Reasons for low wage payment than male workers</b>		
Usually paid less male workers	34.0	102
Paid on the amount of work done	24.7	74
Don't know	19.7	59
<b>Ever complained about the discrepancy</b>		
Yes	7.0	21
No	71.3	214
<b>N</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>300</b>

Table 4.4 represents the difference in wages among the construction workers. Among the respondents, (12%) of women get payment between Rs. 200- 250 per day, while (88% ) get Rs 250-300 which is considered to be very less as compared to male co-workers. The mean wage of the women workers was Rs 250. (78.3%) of women reported that they are paid less than the male workers and (21.7%) receive same as the male worker. One-fourth of the respondent's women reported that there is a difference of wages between them and the male workers which is reported to be ranging around Rs 100-150 only. Unaware of the differentials in wages they are always behind the male workers. Even some of them choose to remain silent in this matter knowingly in fear of losing the work. When asked for being paid low (34.3%) of workers said that they are based on the amount of work done by them followed (19.7%) respondents are ignorant of this discrepancy. Moreover, (71.3%) of women have never complained about this discrepancy to the contractor or the person who hires them whereas only (7.0%) of women have complained regarding discrepancy.

**V) Harassment at Workplace****Table 4.5: Harassment at Workplace**

Covariates	%	N
<b>Relationship with Contractor</b>		
Shouts at you	81	243
Behaves badly	7.7	23
Good	11.3	34
<b>Nature of harassment</b>		
Insulting in front of everyone	74.7	224
Threatening to slap	14.0	42
<b>Behavior with Co-workers</b>		
Same	82.0	246
Not the same	18.0	54
<b>Faced physical harassment by contractor/male worker</b>		
Yes	8.3	25
No	91.7	275
<b>Ever informed to anyone</b>		
Yes	6.3	19
No	93.7	281
<b>Details of harassment shared with</b>		
Female co-workers	6.3	19
<b>Reasons for not informing</b>		
Feeling embarrassed	33.7	101
Ignored it	60.0	180
<b>N</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>300</b>

Table 4.5 reveals the harassment faced by the women at the workplace. Studies reveal that there is prevalence of harassment at the worksite. Sexual harassment by co-workers or contractors is one of the major problems faced by the women workers at the worksite. According to (Rai and Sarkar, 2012) the insecure nature of job itself creates a trap in which the unmarried girls and women are bound to please the contractor and sometimes co-workers in order to get work. The above table reveals the nature of harassment being more of verbal by nature than physical or sexual. Among the respondents (81%) of women workers reported that generally contractor shouts at them and the behavior is also same towards the other workers also. (74.7 % ) of women reported that they are insulted often in front of others while (14.0 % ) reported they were sometimes threatened to be slapped by the male workers. When asked if they have reported about the same to anyone, (93.7%) have not reported to anyone while (6.3%) of women have reportedly informed. (60%) of women stated to have ignored it followed by (33.7%) of women feeling embarrassed to discuss with anyone.

**VI) Facilities for Women Construction Workers****Table 4.6: Facilities for Women Construction Workers**

Covariates	%	N
<b>Get leave when unwell</b>		
Yes	76.7	230
No	23.3	70
<b>Leaves are</b>		
Sufficient	77.7	232
Insufficient	22.7	68
<b>Work while unwell</b>		
Yes	31.0	93
No	69.0	207
<b>Contractor reluctant to grant leave</b>		
Yes	55.3	166
No	44.7	134
<b>Get extra money while unwell</b>		
Not at all	68.7	206
Sometimes	31.3	94
<b>Take children to work</b>		
Yes	52.3	157
No	47.7	143
<b>Do the children help in work</b>		
Yes	14.3	43
No	85.7	257
<b>Nature of work done by children</b>		
Carrying brick	11.7	35
Carrying water	2.7	8
<b>N</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>300</b>

Table 4.6 presents the facilities availed by the women workers in at the construction site. Among the respondents, (76.7%) do not come to work when they are unwell while (23.3% of workers to work on their own will while unwell. As they are daily workers the, the contractor becomes reluctant to grant them leave. ( 55.3%) of women reported that the contractor sometimes does not allow availing them leave if there is shortage of workers , (22.7% ) of workers feel that they do not get sufficient leave while unwell as they have to join the work to sustain their family. Moreover, (68.7%) of women reported that they do not get any extra remuneration while unwell or in case of any mishaps while (31.3 %) sometimes they get the extra money from the person who has hired them instead of the contractor. The table shows that (52.3%) of women take their children to the worksite and around (14.3%) of women agreed that their children help them at the work site. The children help them in carrying brick (11.7%) and (2.7%) carrying water. Even

though, (85.7 %) of women reported that the children do no help in work, still they are exposed to the harsh working conditions at the construction site as there are no crèche or day care facilities available at the worksites.

## VII) Sanitation & Hygiene

**Table 4.7: Facilities for Women Construction Workers**

Covariates	%	N
<b>Sanitation facility available</b>		
No	100	300
<b>Canteen/other facility for taking food</b>		
Yes	8.7	26
No	91.3	274
<b>N</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>300</b>

Table 4.7 depicts the sanitation facilities availed by the workers at the construction site. The 300 sampled respondents stated that they have no toilet facilities at the workplace. With no toilet facilities, most of them continue open defecation as such they tend to go outside the site as they are left with no option. Among the respondents, ( 91.3% ) reported that they have no canteen or cooking facility at the workplace so they bring their food from home while coming to work whereas (8.7% ) women availed nearby hotels or canteens to have food. Moreover the exposure to dust at the workplace also makes them more unhygienic to take food.

## VIII) Safety Measures

**Table 4.8: Safety measures at the worksite**

Covariates	%	N
<b>Safety measures**</b>		
Taken	12.0	36
Not taken	88.0	264
<b>Remunerated on mishaps/accidents</b>		
Sometimes	10.7	32
Not at all	89.3	268
<b>Facility of First – Aid</b>		
Yes	12.7	38
No	87.3	262
<b>N</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>300</b>

\*\* Protective Apparel / Safety Nets /Fencing & Preventive wires.

Table 4.8 depicts the precautions or safety measures available at the work site. As all of them are brick carriers they never got an opportunity to learn other skilled works but only assisted them as

and when required. Among the respondents ( 88%) of women responded that no safety measures were taken at they were exposed to such risk while working at the construction site and (12%) said that safety nets were as they were working in high altitude building. (87.3%) of the respondents reported that there was no first aid facility at the worksite while only (12.7%) sometimes availed the facility at the site. In case of accidents also they were not remunerated. (89.3%) of women workers said that they never get remuneration from the contractors while only (10.7%) are sometimes remunerated by the people who have hired them.

## **DISCUSSION**

Most of the migration process is pushed by the pursuit for survival, lack of unemployment opportunities and growing unorganized sector. Basically, most of the workers belong to the lower social ladder in terms of caste and are economically backward. Women who are engaged in the construction work are found to be working more than 10 hours per day including the household chores and work at site.

The wage difference is very much existing in the construction sector as it is found that the male worker earns Rs 350-400 per day ,whereas the women workers between Rs 250-300 and sometimes less than that. This fact is undeniable from the previous empirical studies in India which shows that the wages of the women workers have been significantly low in the construction sector (Anand, 1998).

The unsafe working condition with the absence of social security, no remuneration in case of accidents or death, absence of facilities like safe drinking water and sanitation, absence of first-aid are some of the negative externality of the construction sector. They are hired by the contractor but are devoid of basic facilities which are sanctioned by the labour law. Neither they are befitting by the contractor nor are they aware of their rights which make the matter worse for them. In addition to these problems the women are not given maternity leave and day care facilities at the worksite.

Women workers agree that they face harassment but suffer in silence as they are very scared to let the matter come out in open. They are exposed to verbal abuse by the male co-workers, contractors as well as other persons working at the construction site but they tend to remain silent in this matter and this become habitual to it. (Haripriya, 2002) also stated that the construction workers are open to different forms of violence in form abuse from co-workers, extra marital relationship as they are poor.

### **Qualitative insights from the study:**

**Case Study 1-** Rukuni Gudi, 28 years from Bhandari Pokhari, Bhadrak along with her husband came to Bhubaneswar in search of work. Both of them started to work at the construction site near Raghunathpur of Bhubaneswar as daily laborers. However, she lost her husband to brain fever. Left without any choice, she continued to work there for her livelihood. She earned around Rs 230-250 per day depending on the work done. One day while carrying bricks on her head she fell down from the bamboo constructed ladder. She was seriously injured and sustained injuries on her head, leg and back for which she had to discontinue her work for two weeks or more. At the worksite, first aid was not available and neither was she paid for her treatment. She had to borrow money from her relatives to afford the medical expenses. After recovering, she was unable to work at the construction site and was removed from the work by the contractor. In her replacement her mother-in-law was hired to complete the work. Now, she is working as a domestic help to meet the requirements.

The case study represents the fact that there is no availability of safeguards as well as first- aid for the workers working at the site. There is no job security and the nature of is very casual for them as they can be removed any time from the work.

**Case study 2-** Shayamalata Naik, 36 years from Ramagiri of Ganjam, came to Bhubaneswar with both her daughters after his husband settled at one of the slums in the city. After coming to Bhubaneswar she also started working along with his husband at the same construction site. She often took both her girls to the worksite as they were very young to be left alone at the home. They were left at the worksite with the other children of workers. Usually she left for work at around 8.30 am and came back by 6.30 pm. Despite the presence of her husband, she was exposed to lewd comments made by the co-workers and sometimes by the people on the road. As per her statement she was not happy at the worksite as the work was very strenuous and the wage was insufficient. Moreover, there was no sanitation facility and everyone used the open space for urination. They also used the tank water for drinking purpose which was also not clean. But as there was no other way, they were bound to drink that tank water only.

## **CONCLUSION**

The construction sector as an industry supports migration in developing countries both in terms of skilled as well as unskilled laborers. Especially the women migrants have to undergo difficulties in the form of abuse as well as are exploited by the hands of contractor as well as co-workers. Thereby, this becomes indispensable to explore the conditions of women engaged in construction work. Their situation needs to be improved especially in housing, care for children, safe environment, accessing health care facilities and lead a life where they can at least avail bare necessities. Moreover, proper rules and regulations should be ascertained so that the women workers can be protected from exploitation and keep their dignity of labour intact. Along with

this, the basic amenities like access to safe drinking water, separate toilets for men and women, safety measures, remuneration in case of injury should also be ensured for the women workers.

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