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SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND PROBLEMS OF WOMEN CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW



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Abstract: *The construction industry is the major source of employment for workers in the unorganized sector and it is one of the major contributors to offer the largest employment opportunity next to agriculture. The nature of women's work is highly fragmented in the unorganized sector. The unorganized sector has no clear-cut employer-employee relationships and lacks in most forms of social protection. The construction industry has the largest number of women unorganized workers in India. The construction sector and construction workers are the backbones of our nation's infrastructure development. Both men and women play important role in the infrastructure development of the country, but the construction industry offer women for unskilled works and remain to be unskilled worker till their working life span. The women construction workers are working in high-risk working conditions and hazardous working environments due to hazards working environment they face many health issues and they also face several issues related to discrimination, no proper fixed employer, low wages, health issue, insecurity in the job, lack of social protection, sexual harassment and injuries at the workplace. The conditions of women workers in the construction sites are very pathetic. The main aim of this present paper is to study the socio-economic status and problems of women construction workers.*

Keywords: *Construction Industry, socio-economic status and health problems.*

Introduction

A very high percentage of India's workforce is estimated to be employed in the unorganized industry. According to the NSS survey (2009-10), out of the total estimated workforce of 457.5 million workers, 148 million are female (roughly 38%). Out of the

total women workforce of 148 million, 142 million or nearly 96% of all female workers are in the unorganized sector. Most of the female workers are engaged in low paid and unskilled works.

Workers in the unorganized sector, unlike their counterparts in the organized sector, have very less or no social security, little negotiating power in terms of choice of work, are often 'unskilled' and work in poor conditions. However, the unorganized sector is extremely complex and there are wide differences in nature of work, employer-employee relation, wage levels, degree of informality, size of enterprise and skill.

The construction industry is a major source of employment worldwide, arguably the second largest after the agriculture sector and generally the primary employment source in urban areas. Building construction (both new build and maintenance) are labor-intensive activities, generating many jobs per unit of investment both on and off the building site.

The construction industry makes a major positive contribution to the economy of all the countries. The output of the industry worldwide is estimated at around \$3,000 billion per annum. The industry creates employment for more than 110 million people worldwide. The provision of large numbers of jobs at relatively low investment cost per job invested is particularly important in developing countries, where the construction industry plays a major role in combating the high levels of unemployment and in absorbing surplus labor from the rural areas.

Construction provides much-needed work opportunities for some of the poorest and most marginalized sections of society in developing countries. Construction output, by value, is heavily concentrated in the developed world. The high-income countries of Europe are responsible for 30% of global output, the United States for 21% and Japan for 20. The figure for India is only 1.7%; for China, despite its huge size and rapid economic growth in recent years, is only 6%. While three-quarters of output is in developed countries, three-quarters of employment is in the developing world. Many construction workers in these countries are informally employed and not counted in official data, so the real number is likely much higher.

Construction workers are the backbone of the economy as they create the infrastructure necessary for industrial growth. In a globalizing economy, it is they who are constructing the new economy. India's three crore construction workers are the builders of modern India. They contribute to the infrastructural development of India by building the roads and highways, the railway tracks and airports and ports, the IT cities, the call centres and mega malls that are creating new forms of wealth today. It is they who are laying the cables for a rapidly expanding country-wide telecommunications network that connect the vast sub-continent and make India one country, to short the distance and supporting the business activities to upgrade the economic development.

While men can move up the ladder of a career in construction, women have no promotion or aspiration. Interests in patriarchy and entrenched gender inequities, rather than any inherent differences in physical capability, have drawn these divisions and made acquiring any construction skills taboo for women in India. While men start work as helpers or coolies on construction sites, and gradually acquire and upgrade their skills on the job, it is unthinkable for a woman to do any other task than the ones she performed on her first day on the job. They join as unskilled workers and retire as unskilled workers. They earn very much less when compared to men. Men move up to be masons and then become a supervisor and many even become contractors. But women are denied promotional opportunities. The male-dominated construction sector does not encourage women to become masons.

Most women construction workers were hired in the rural areas by subcontractors. They were generally hired and paid through their husbands, which meant that their names were not listed in the payroll record of the subcontractors. The traditional, male-dominated social system in India, the nature of women's works as casual labourers and the subcontractors' unwillingness to disclose the number of women workers to avoid the obligation to pay social costs, contributed to their invisibility.

The invisibility of women workers hindered them from improving their working and living conditions. Women workers were forced to work in unsafe and unsanitary environments for long hours. They suffered from many kinds of injuries and accidents at work which often harmed their reproduction capacity. Women workers' wages were lower than male workers' wages. Needless to say, the industry took advantage of this situation. Contractors sometimes threatened that they would not hire women workers if they insisted on receiving equal pay. The inequality was rooted in the lack of skill, as well as the failure to recognize skills, among women workers. The traditional system whereby skills were transferred from father to son prevented women workers from receiving skill training, which was given only to male workers. But even when women workers did possess skills, they did not receive a fair evaluation and contractors would never hire them as skilled workers.

Objectives of the study

1. To study the socio-economic status of the women construction workers
2. To examine the problems of women construction workers
3. To offer suggestions for the betterment of women construction workers.

Methodology of the present study

The present study is purely based on secondary data and was by the review of journals, research articles and books. In-depth data was collected through the secondary source of methods.

Review of literature

Maheswari (2020) studied, "A Study on the Socio-Economic Status of Women Labourers in the Unorganised Sector in Trichirappalli City Corporation". The author stated that most of the women workers are engaged in unorganised sectors. The unorganised sector is one of the best sources of employment for both semi-skilled and unskilled workers. In the unorganised sector, most of the women workers are unskilled workers. Because of their illiteracy, poverty, ignorance and no skills, they are working for fewer wages. The author wants to study socio-economic status, problems of women labours in unorganised sectors and implementation of government policies. The author findings clearly show that most of the women workers age group between 36 – 45 years, most of them are married, illiterates and live in a joint family. The author found that most of the women unorganised workers belong to poor families and they are facing economic problems. The author analysis shows that women workers in the unorganised sector are facing many problems like low wages, gender discrimination, unsatisfied working conditions, health issues, long working hours, heavy workload and various types of harassment. Illiteracy, poverty, fewer skills and ignorance are the main reasons for women workers to continue their jobs under miserable working conditions. Government and the Ministry of Labour and Employment look at protective measures, security at the workplace and the health of women workers in the unorganised sector. It is a need for the government to conduct awareness and skill development programmes for women workers and also government strictly implement the equal remuneration act.

Darling Selvi and Veilatchi (2019) studied, "Problems of Women Construction Workers in Kovilpatti". The author mainly focuses on the problems facing the women construction workers in Kovilpatti. Most of the women workers are present in the construction industry of the unorganised sector. The construction industry plays a vital role in the infrastructure development of any country and it is one of the highly male-dominated industries in the unorganised sector. The author said that women in the construction industry are facing many problems like health issues, insecurity problems, gender discrimination, low wages and work hazards. Through this study, the author found that the main and serious problem of women construction workers is sexual harassment. The author observed that the women construction workers are facing many problems because they do not have any better job opportunities, do not have training programmes to develop their skills and unemployment problem. These are the main reasons for women construction workers to stick to this unsatisfied job. Still, more women workers are interested to work in the construction industry. The women construction workers need support and training to develop their skills, awareness programmes, social security to overcome these problems faced by the women workers. The author finally concluded that women in the construction industry were in miserable condition and the author strongly recommended that, the policies and acts be implemented strictly. Government takes initial steps to make policies on equal treatment for equal work.

Samuel (2019) studied, "Socio-Economic Conditions of Unorganised Women Construction Workers in Tirunelveli City". The author analyses the socio-economic conditions, status and family living conditions of the unorganised women construction workers. The author investigation clearly shows that married women workers are largely employed in the construction industry, most of them are between 41 – 50 years age group, most of them are illiterates or have low educational qualifications. Most of the women construction workers live in rural areas in their own houses. But they do not have proper basic facilities like kitchen, toilets and bedroom facilities. The author observed that majority of the women workers are engaged as unskilled workers in the construction industry. The author finally concluded that women construction workers are facing many problems like economical, health hazards, occupational hazards, poor working conditions and discrimination in remuneration. They are living under very low socio-economic status. The government and construction welfare board implemented many welfare and safety programmes but most of the women workers are not aware of that programme, so they need awareness of those programmes. The government and welfare board come forward and introduce new and fruitful social security schemes for unorganised women construction workers to the upliftment of socio-economic status.

Lavanya (2018) studied, "Sexual Harassment of Women in Unorganised sector – The Concealed Reality". The author stated that the majority of the women workforce is present in the unorganised sector and working as rag pickers, domestic workers, coolies, vendors, construction workers, garment workers etc. The women workers in the unorganised sector are facing many problems like low remuneration, seasonal employment, no job security, low growth opportunity, long working hours, gender discrimination, male domination, health issues, sexual harassment etc. The author finds out that, most of the women unorganised workers are illiterates and unskilled workers. The majority of the women workers face serious sexual harassment at the workplace and the majority of cases are not reported. The author said that National Commission on Women (NCW), International Labour Organisation (ILO), CEDAW, National and International Federation are contributing their efforts to upliftment and security of women unorganised workers. The government also take many measures to reduce the problems of women workers but still, the women workers are facing many problems. The women unorganised workers need awareness of their rights, government amendments and laws. The government take some strict actions against sexual harassment. The author concluded that this is the time the government introduce effective policies and laws for both the organised and unorganised women workers. They need self-awareness, skill and maturity on sexual harassment at the workplace it leads to a decrease the sexual harassment against women workers.

Socio-economic status of the Women Construction Workers

The exploitation of female labourers in the construction sector happens both horizontally and vertically. The main reason for women to enter the construction

sector is the lack of education and the lack of a quality education system in Indian society. Illiteracy is a major problem because they do not get time to educate themselves. And low income of the family is the compelling factor for the women common to choose for seeking jobs in unorganized sectors to increase the family earning to sustain livelihood. Unemployment and temporary work are more common among women. Work-related factors, most women workers do not have any social security or access to health care benefits. It is strongly recommended that mere framing of policies and acts may not serve the purpose. Minimum wages also do not provide for women in this sector, particularly in democratic India.

Problems of Women Construction Workers

In the construction industry, women workers are facing many problems like wage discrimination, gender discrimination, unhygienic working conditions, sexual harassment, physical harassment, lack of job security, lack of safety measures, long working hours, lack of toilet facility and health problems like respiratory problems, skin issues, eye problems, headache, back pain, urinary tract disorders etc.

Findings

1. The majority of the respondents belong to the Hindu Religion.
2. Backward Caste (ST and SC) is the main source of the construction industry.
3. The majority of the women workers in the construction industry are married.
4. The majority of the women construction workers are illiterates.
5. The majority of the women construction workers are not having own house facility
6. The majority of the women construction workers are migrants.
7. The majority of the workers are not having land.
8. Most of them are belongs to nuclear families.
9. The majority of the households had total members are ranging from 2 – 4 members.
10. The majority of the women construction workers are earning above 6000 rupees per month.
11. The majority of the women construction workers are facing headaches, back pain, respiratory problems, skin problems, body pains and urinary tract issues.
12. The majority of the women construction workers are facing gender discrimination, wage discrimination, sexual harassment, workplace discrimination, lack of social security, lack of safety measures, unhygienic working conditions etc problems.

13. The majority of the women construction workers are expending more than their wages.

Suggestions

1. Women workers lack in skill, skill development programs should be provided to them to enhance their skill level.
2. Women workers should be educated and made aware of their rights and legislative provisions.
3. It is very much essential to create awareness among women workers about the institutional support available to them to protect their rights.
4. Any kind of exploitation including sexual harassment of women workers is to be prevented and stringent action needs to be taken against the wrongdoer.
5. Mass media should be used to communicate the social message relating to women equality.
6. Necessary amendments are required to be made in labour laws.
7. There should be proper regulation of unorganized sector industries, which ensure job security, a healthy work environment and at least minimum wages, maternity and child care benefits.
8. To provide minimum needs at the workplace.
9. To avoid accidents at the workplace to provide proper safety measures.

Conclusion

The construction industry is an ongoing industry with the increase in the population there is an increase in the demands of the construction works proportionately in the form of houses, malls offices, apartments etc. The construction industry women workers are facing grave problems such as socio-economic problems, insecurity, wage discrimination, absence of medical and accidental care, lack of continuity etc. this is due to their seasonal intermittent nature of work, low-level irregular patterns of earning and employment, absence of employer-employee relationship and weak administrative structure. It is also clear that self-awareness and education are the magic wands that will fuel the revolution. The government and real estate leaders must try and understand the situation of the women construction workers. The overall analysis of the study reveals that the construction workers are one of the poorest sections of the society, living in poverty. For the better living of construction workers, they should be added to the government sector.

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