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Problems of workplace culture & status of women construction labourers in India

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Abstract--The construction sector has the largest number of unorganized labourers in India next only to the agricultural sector, and women form almost half the workforce as unskilled labourers with no occupational mobility. Often they face serious Problems constraints related to work, viz., lack of continuity, insecurity, wage discrimination, gender and sexual harassment, unhealthy job relationship, lower wages, and poor job satisfaction. Despite these, the construction industry overwhelmingly attracts female workers. Poverty being the main cause, the worst affected are the single destitute women with children to support. Their husbands are often drunkards or are found to have other sexual partners and find themselves in debt trap. Unlike the womenfolk, men who come in as small boys, assist the masons for some years as helpers and finally, graduate as masons, some of whom later become contractors and move up the social ladder. Hence, the female labourers require empowerment through training and skill enhancement. The present study is an attempt to identify the issues related to workplace culture or working environment of these numerous, poor and most vulnerable segments of the Indian society These Construction labourers are one of the most vulnerable segments of the unorganized sector as there is no permanent job opportunity for them.

Keywords--Women, Labourer, Construction, Problems, Poverty.

Introduction

Since the pandemic has made a complete stop to the daily income the women workers are struggling for food shelter and daily living for themselves and their children. Most of the State Government in India does not support or cared about

them. This Community has been neglected by the government. Since there is law for the welfare of the labours, the government does not pave way for their welfare. So the women labours in India have no way of getting the government scheme but they got help from the social workers and NGO's to fulfill the part of their basic needs. This study is to implement the government and social workers like NGO's to take appropriate steps to help out the women's basic needs till the end of the pandemic and they have to sort out new and strong laws for their welfare and for the growth of their children. It is easy like NGO's to provide food for certain people and at a certain time. But the welfare laws and government schemes will provide a lifelong security living for the labour women in the society.

Gender Bias in Construction Sector

More than half of the construction workers in India are women. They are employed in semi-skilled skilled jobs in other industries but in the construction industry women are employed mostly as unskilled labourers Majority views that women lack skills to carry out certain tasks in the construction sector. This mind set has led to gender discrimination in this sector in work allocation and wage distribution such anti-women attitudes and discrimination further complicate the workplace culture of these women labourers. They lead a very tough life and do not enjoy equality of status and social justice.

Objectives of Study:

The present study aims at:

1. Identifying the major issues related to workplace culture of women construction labourers.
2. Analysing the major health and safety issues at construction sites.
3. Examining the status of these women in social ladder.
4. Identifying the role of Government and other NGOs in providing safety and security to this workforce, and recommending measures for mitigation of the problems.

However, the opportunity of work to these old labourers decreases overtime as employers prefer younger women as they are more agile and able to work harder. No doubt there are some primary employment, safety and health hazards faced by all construction workers, but the prevalence of sex-discrimination and anti-women attitudes at work place, restricted access to basic facilities and intimidating or offensive working environment adversely affecting women's ability to perform their job satisfactorily, analysis also presents a stark reality of a severely degraded working environment, among several constraints, some basic issues are discussed as follows.

Restricted Access to Basic Facility

About 80% of respondents report that they lack proper facilities for drinking water at the workplace. Often it varies over space, or if available, not so safe at all. Access to sanitary facilities is a common problem on a new construction site. Temporary facilities are usually unisex, often without privacy. Sometime there is no sanitary facility available for women to use. In such cases, they either use

open space or avoid drinking water on the job, risk heat stress and other health problems. Although various acts exist under which women are entitled to maternity leave and benefits, out of the total respondents no one's getting any such benefits. Thekedars or builders are supposed to provide a crèche at every site where women are employed but again these are breached and women are in no position to demand these rights. Lactating women find it extremely hard to care for babies while doing a full day's work. They frequently hide from contractors in order to feed their babies. Often women are forced to leave babies and toddlers uncared for on the ground floors of building while they climb up multiple floors of high-rises, balancing bricks or mortar on their heads.

Constraints during Wage Payment

Study reveals that there is a vast discrimination faced by these women construction labourers, which become starker on the salary day. Apart 92 per cent of respondents report that they are cheated by their contractors on the salary day and delaying payment has just become the part and parcel of their job work. They are also facing wage-differentials from their female co-workers as reported.

Hostile Workplace

Study reveals that about 90 per cent of these women construction labourers consider their jobs a hazardous occupation, as there is some serious health and safety problems prevails unique to female construction workers only. According to them the small numbers of women construction workers on construction worksites foster an environment in which these safety and health problems arise or continue.

Sexual Harassment at Work Place

Sexual harassment is a serious problem for female construction workers. 74 per cent of respondents reported Sexual Harassment at work place. Study also reveals 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. In which she accepted that to get employment, she forced some other poor young girls to please contractors; as in turn contractors has promised her to provide regular employment opportunities and 20 per cent of extra commission on her wage for the next whole year. Some reports that they are exploited by hekedars both sexually as well as economically, Many times such situations force them to leave the job. They are also reluctant to report about such safety problems, lest they can be tagged as a complainer, straining further their workplace relationship and destroying their employment

Accidents at Workplace

Work related to the construction industry is one of the most hazardous with serious risks involved, especially in physical terms and accidents. Most of The operations and tasks become risky and vulnerable when workers are not given any training regarding health and safety; hence there is a greater incidence as

well as severity of accidents in this industry. About 60 per cent of women mention accidents, one reports, she broke her hand while many others reporting about normal accidents due to:

- Failure or collapsing of scaffolding
- Inadequate care regarding fire and
- Against electrocution

During handling of heavy finished and semi- finished materials like metals etc. They also mentions that help extended after accidents vary over the nature of the employer, but basically they face negative reactions.

Common Health Hazards

It is well known fact that working at construction site , may have negative health consequences, as it is more exposed to chronic health hazards (noise, silica, asbestos, manmade fibres , lead and other metals, hazardous waste etc.), associated with electrocution and musculoskeletal disorder lifting, awkward postures, repetitive motion, flying or falling objects etc.) However there is lack of proper knowledge about health hazards among the construction labourers but still some of them claimed that due to the unhealthy and unhygienic environment at construction worksite, they are suffering from various types of ailments. The findings also showed that allegedly harassment by co-workers or the kedars is an important predictor for symptoms of increased psychological and physiological distress.

Low level of Job Satisfaction

The Aforementioned situation associated with the construction workplace further giving birth to high level dissatisfaction among these women labourers as reported. The level of dissatisfaction can be analysed from the fact that about 60 per cent of respondents want to leave the sector if they will get another opportunity.

Reasons of Entering in such 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 attracting female labourers next only to the agricultural sector. On the question why despite such a hostile workplace, a large number Do womenfolk take jobs at sites? About 46% of respondents report that they do not have any other option, as they are widow or abandoned by 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 I have to take a job at a site. Another group is forced by poverty while few are working to improve their economic status or helping other existing members of the family in the construction industry. It is largely noticed that on one hand where these womenfolk lack any particular skill, one the other they are forced to work in such a situation. The construction sector is the only industry which generates employment and absorbs unskilled, semiskilled and rural labour force.

Status of the Women in Society

“Social ladder” is defined as the hierarchical structure of a society also known as social scale. Powerless people always try to have control over their lives by empowering themselves so that they can be move up in social ladder and can enjoy better life opportunities. But these women construction labourers denied any such promotional opportunities in their lives. At each phase of their life they live the same life. The analysis of their social life reveals that the majorities of them migrate temporarily in search of a job and often become displaced. Years later, they still do not have access to ration cards and voters identity cards. Due to lack of such documentary proof of their identity, they are denied to access basic facilities for poor provided by the government. . They built houses for others but have no houses of their own. About 84% of respondents report that they live in rented houses, often in slums, and lack almost all basic amenities of sewerage, water supply and sanitation. About 54% of respondents report about irregular dietary habits, such ill-habits further pave the way to harmful addictions of bidi smoking, paan chewing and tobacco consumption etc. Apart from working a full day it is a woman who is entirely responsible for buying provision, cooking food and caring for children. Men rarely help with any form of house-work or childcare. These women are playing dual roles, working at site and managing their home. Somewhere between, they fall prey to domestic violence and daily humiliation as an essential part of having a family. The married women are the worst sufferer. They usually spend most of their earnings on the household to meet the dire needs of their children and family, and a very few amount on working class fashion such as tobacco, bidi and other forms of entertainment.

What do Women Want?

In reply to this Question were asked what they wanted from the government and Society, women construction workers said that — they want the society and government to ensure regular decent work more safely and satisfactorily.

“Women friendly environment” at the worksite is very much necessary so they can work more safely and satisfactorily. They need relief from the exploitation of thekendras (both physically and economically).

The lack of ration cards means that they lose out on all the benefits available through various government schemes, hence easy availability of ration card and voter cards is very much necessary. Major Issues and Suggestions It have become evident that the majority of construction workers are forced to migrate from their native place in search of work and become displaced.

Years later, they still do not have access to ration cards and voter cards. The major hurdle in issuing such a card is that it requires a birth certificate and documentary proof of age and residence; women workers are mainly uneducated and have neither birth certificate nor school certificates. The option according to the rules is certification by a government doctor not below the rank of an assistant surgeon in a government hospital. It is also difficult for them to obtain such certification. The lack of ration cards mean that they lose out on all the benefits available through various government schemes and they are forced to live

in insecure, inhumane conditions because of the lack of housing, steps should be taken to solve such problems. There must be facilities available for workers to sell their labor power. Hundreds of workers assemble at road crossings or at stations to find casual daily work. There is no drinking water available at these sites and no toilets either. In summer the situation is horrible as there is no shade and nowhere to sit. It is suggested therefore that places where workers gather in search of employment should be notified and basic facilities such as shade, provisions for seating, drinking water and toilets should be provided at these places by the state government. Thekendras or builders are supposed to provide a crèche, separate toilets for women and proper facility of drinking water where women are employed. Findings show that such aforesaid conduct is common for all women construction labourers, therefore strong steps should be taken to stop such inhumane behaviour the removal of occupational immobilization by empowering these women construction labourers are also realized through study. The study shows that these women are capable of doing masonry work. They have the competency, capability, ability, skills and work culture to become masons. About ten per cent of them want to become masons and they have tried and are already some of the tasks carried out by men masons, which shows that women have the potential to become masons. Learning from Tamil Nadu Government, steps can be taken to train and employ these women, Governmental, Quasi-governmental agencies and non- governmental organizations can come forward to honour such women masons and the contractors who employ them, can give them similar informal training (as given to male mason) with wide media publicity. Remember economic empowerment alone can save these women from the thralldom of poverty and disease. Many direct and indirect benefits can accrue from economic independence; the chief among them are nutritious diet, access to health care, education for children, proper dwelling and even social security. There is also a need to give older, retiring women alternative income generating skills. By keeping in view the prevalence of insecurity and underemployment among these works, it is imperative that social security measures (insurance, pensions and other benefits) should be extended immediately. The specific schooling facilities to children of these workers need to be made available. Otherwise another generation will grow up as handicapped as their parents because they lack basic literacy and education. It is also suggested that at least 20 per cents of jobs on government construction sites should be reserved for women, because they are discriminated against and denied work by the kendras. There is inadequate information on the extent to which female construction workers are exposed to various health hazards at the workplace, in particular the health research on female construction workers is desirable.

The Union membership of women has to be increased. Collection and compilation of data, related to construction labourers is desirable on annual basis for the execution of proper research work and development for this sector. Detailed Study of Workplace Culture and safety should be analysed in detail. In addition female workers should be questioned about specific health and safety concerns or issues that are unique to them on a jobsite. To fulfil the basic objectives of various government schemes, proper campaigning and advertisement is necessary from grass root level. Such positive steps could pave the way for social justice and sustaining human rights of these women construction labourers.

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