

Condition of women construction workers: A case study of Gandhinagar

Dissertation submitted to the



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CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF GUJARAT

Central University of Gujarat

for the award of the degree of

Master of Philosophy

In

Economics

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Gandhinagar, India

March, 2019

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Expanding opportunities for productive and decent employment are key to achieving poverty reduction, high economic growth and overall welfare of the society. People aspire for decent work in their working life. This included working opportunities which are productive and provide security and safety to the workers as well as their families. There should be freedom of expression on the part of the workers so that they can share their concerns and also take part in any decision-making process which is related to their betterment and wellbeing. Decent work also involves equal job opportunities and facilities for both male and female. However, women are in a worse situation when it comes to equality in availing job opportunities and work facilities. The United Nations Economic and Social Council has defined decent work as an employee that “respects the fundamental rights of the human as well as the rights of workers in terms of the condition of work safety and remuneration, respect for the physical and mental integrity of the workers in the exercise of his/her employment.” (UNESC)

Condition of working women always has been an issue of great concern. Despite their increasing participation in the workforce, women are still disadvantaged in the labour market in terms of their share in employment, remuneration and working condition. Majority of the female workers in the informal sector that is hardly covered by any social protection scheme. Since last few years’ women are shifting towards the construction sector from agriculture. It is caused by a lack of employment opportunities in the agriculture sector that may be the result of farm mechanisation. Construction has emerged another important sector after agriculture to provide employment opportunities to unskilled female workers. Expansion in construction activities led to the rural women migrating towards the urban centre for their livelihood.

India’s economic reform that started in 1991 was premised on the idea that it would make local industries more competitive, helping them capture world market, which in turn would enable millions of India workers to move away from low-productive farm jobs to a high-productivity factory job. However, the evidence shows that since 1990-91, it is the construction sector that is generating a big chunk of jobs. The construction

sector added almost as many new non-farm jobs as the next four top job-generating sectors—trade, miscellaneous services, transport and storage, and education—put together. While the construction boom in the country has helped people seeking an exit from farm jobs to find an alternative, it has not helped them move to a very productive job. It is observed that construction has among the lowest productivity among the top job-generating sectors.

The construction sector has shown a pioneering growth in the recent past and is one of the main sectors to provide job opportunities to the unskilled labour force. However, working in this sector involves the risk of accidents, health hazards and stress among the workers. Female workers are at greater risk because of the existence of gender-based violence and lack of proper facilities and infrastructure like toilet facilities, drinking water and last but not the least proper security for their safety of women working in this sector.

In this background present study made an attempt to analyse the working condition of female construction workers. It is done by looking at their and their children health condition at the workplace and availability of basic amenities-drinking water, sanitation, primary health care, etc. This study was conducted in Gandhinagar city in the state of Gujarat. For this purpose, 100 construction women workers were interviewed, and various relevant information was collected.

In a prelude to this, we have also analysed the census 2011 data in order to get a macro picture of the distribution of women workers across the various sector in Gujarat. The analysis is presented in Chapter -3. It came out from the analysis that the largest share of women is working as agriculture labourer followed by the cultivator. Overall nearly 65 % of total women workers in Gujarat are engaged in agriculture and related activities. Share of women working in the agriculture sector was found to be higher for SC and ST than ‘other’ social group. It is also observed that the share of female workers engaged in agriculture is higher in case of marginal workers than main workers. That is an indication of the residual nature of agriculture employment. The proportion of women workers is consistently increasing in the construction industry. A large proportion of the women working in the construction and agriculture industry belong to SC and ST social group. Those are largely employed in the informal sector as unskilled workers.

That may be the result of illiteracy and high prevalence of poverty among these social groups. The City of Gandhinagar follows the same pattern as the state of Gujarat.

Participation of female workers in the construction industry found to be low (nearly 3.63 %). It is largely dominated by female workers belonging to SC social groups in Gujarat. It is true in case of both main and marginal workers. Looking at the rural sector alone it is evident that a large share of female workers in Gujarat is engaged in the agriculture sector. Participation in the construction sector is too low. Contrary to that urban sector registered highest share of female workers participating in service sector likes: Arts, Entertainment and Recreation, Other Service Act, Activities of households as employers: undifferentiated goods and services, Activities of Extra-Territorial Organisation& Bodies NHHI, education, human health and social work activities. As expected participation of urban women workers in the agriculture sector is too low. In the urban sector too share of female working in construction activities is very low but higher than that of rural one. Unlike in the rural sector, female construction workers in urban Gujarat are largely coming from ST households.

In the district of Gandhinagar share of ST women workers engaged in the construction sector is higher than others. Among the overall ST women workers, the largest share is engaged in agriculture and related activities. In the rural area of the district proportion of ST women engaged in the construction activities are much higher.

In order to understand the ground reality about the working condition of female construction workers, the primary survey was conducted in the City of Gandhinagar in Gujarat. Information was collected from six different locations and fourteen construction sites. It is observed from the survey that the majority of female construction workers belong to 15-40 years of age. A large proportion of them was out of states of which largely belongs to Madhya Pradesh. That is also from one districts-Jhabua. This happens as they come in groups. Majority of these women are illiterate or less educated. In the sample, most of the women were married and migrated with the family-husband and children.

Majority of women are engaged in unskilled manual work. One of the appreciated observations of the survey was the absence of gender differences in wages. Male and female are paid similar wages for similar work. The differences in male-female

wages were due to the differences in the kind of work they perform. Women are getting their wages regularly.

Both the pull and push factors (Push factors may include conflict, drought, famine, poor economic activities and lack of job opportunities while pull factors are those factors in the destination that attract the individual workers like; employment opportunities and higher wages) seems to be working for the migration of women workers. Having a thorough discussion with the women workers it came out that woman workers are attracted with higher prices at the destination and same time forced due to the lack of opportunities in their native places. Women workers are largely migrating with family, not as an individual.

Availability of basic amenities is the most appropriate indicators to understand the living condition. At a worksite availability of basic amenities inform about the working condition of the workers. In the present studies, most of the construction sites have the basic amenities-drinking water and toilet facilities were available, though they have reported about the problem of cleaning and unavailability of water. A few worksite availabilities of toilets was not reported, therefore, women go to forest nearby.

Workers were provided housing made of plastic/tin. In some construction site, they were staying in the same building they were working in. It may be that at the beginning of the work they are staying in the temporary houses made of plastic/tin, latter when roofing part is get completed they moved inside the building.

None of the surveyed construction women workers reported any harassment by their employer. However, some women construction workers reported harassment and teasing by their co-workers. To prevent this they reported it to their husband who is also working with them or to the employer.

Women workers at the construction site face several health risks. Risk regarding dust-related diseases such as asthma, allergy, backaches, headache, etc. Women frequently face injuries during work. Several women reported injury during work, injury in their feet and finger. In our sample, most of the women prefer private hospital than public hospital for any kind of medical treatment. In their view, medical services in private hospital are much better than the public one. They do accept the fact that private

hospitals are costlier, but they prefer it because of better services. In addition, they think that doctor in the public hospital does not treat properly.

At some of the construction sites, the van is provided to facilitate construction workers to get medical services. It provides transport facility to the workers for common diseases. During the discussion, it came out that women construction workers lack awareness regarding health issues and injury. They are unaware regarding, measures to be used during their menstruation. They were found to be re-using old clothes again and again. Few women reported body pain, weakness during their menstruation but still continue to work.

Another serious issue observed was working during pregnancy. In our sample we found some women working during their pregnancy. In addition, many of the construction women workers were have small kids. Due to their work, they were not giving enough attention to their children that may have a serious effect on the health and development of their children. It is suggestive that the employer needs to provide some facility for these children. And for the women who are pregnant or have small kids, there should be some scheme for compensation so that women do not have to be forced to work. The construction site is full of risk for the children, there is a high chance of injury, lungs and skin related diseases. Life of construction workers is very pathetic. They work hard still lives in poverty, lack basic amenities and low level of education.

Construction workers frequently migrate from one place to another place. Once construction works get completed at one site they migrate to another place. This affects the schooling of their children which is going to severely affect their future progress. Mostly women construction workers are unaware of the government scheme related to them and their children's welfare. There are several schemes implemented by the state and central government for the welfare of the poor section of the society but lack of awareness preventing them to utilise that. This is not a surprising observation by looking at their low level of education.

Policy Implications: The importance of the research finding of the study lies in providing evidence of the absence of gender wage differences. The study observed that there are no gender wage differences for the same kind of work. Absence of sexual and other kinds of harassment is something needs to be learned by other parts

of the country. Lack of basic amenities in some construction site is something to worry about.

Therefore, the study suggests for providing basic amenities like water, toilet and primary health care at the construction site. Providing basic health facility and making them aware about the common health issues is something need to be taken seriously. The awareness about the menstruation-related health problem is much more important. The issue related to children has to be given priority in the policy formulation.