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Workplace Culture & Status of Women Construction Labourers: a case study in Kolkata, West Bengal

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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, construction industry overwhelmingly attracts female workers. Poverty being the main cause, the worst affected are the single and the derelict / 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.

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Introduction

Construction sector is the world's largest industrial employer with 7% of total world employment and 28% of industrial employment (Improving Working and Living Conditions in Construction, 2004). In India, it is the largest employer of unorganized labour next to agricultural sector (Laskar and Murty, 2004). The contribution of construction sector in India to the GDP at factor cost in 2006–07 was Rs. 1,965,550 million, registering an increase of 10.7% from the previous year and the share of construction in GDP has increased from 6.1% in 2002–03 to 6.9% in 2006–07 (GOI, 2008). Around 16% of the India's working population depends on building construction for its livelihood and the Indian construction industry today employs about 31 million people and creates assets worth over Rs 200,000 million (India Infra Guru, 2008; GOI, 2008a) annually.

However, the construction industry in India is facing a huge shortage of manpower. The strength of skilled workforce in construction has dwindled substantially from 15.34% in 1995 to 10.57% in 2005,

whereas relative proportions of unskilled workers have gone up from 73.08% in 1995 to 82.45% in 2005 (GOI, 2008b). These construction labourers are one of the most vulnerable segments of the unorganized sector as there is no permanent job opportunity for them.

Gender Bias in Construction Sector

More than half of the construction workers in India are women (GOI, 2008a). They are employed in semi-skilled / skilled jobs in other industries but in the construction industry women are employed mostly as unskilled labourers (Jhabvala & Kanbur, 2002; Baruah, 2008). They clean building sites, carrying bricks, gravel, mortar and water up to the skilled carpenters and masons, irrespective of the number of years they worked there. Majority views that women lack skills to carry out certain tasks in construction sector. This mindset has led to gender discrimination in this sector in work allocation and wage distribution (Suchitra and Rajshekhar, 2006).

Such anti-women attitudes and discrimination further complicate the workplace culture of these women labourers. They led a very tough life and do not enjoy equality of status and social justice.

Objectives of Study

The present study aims at — identifying the major issues related to workplace culture of women construction labourers, analyzing the major health and safety issues at construction sites, examining the status of these women in social ladder, identifying the role of Government and other NGO's in providing safety and security to this workforce, and recommending measures for mitigation of the problems.

Database and Methodology

Kolkata, the capital city of West Bengal has been selected as the study area, as the construction industry is growing rapidly. Workers from the neighbouring districts as well as from the neighbor states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha approach this metropolis to seek job at site. The whole study has been carried out in the following three stages –

1. **Pre-Field Study:** includes gathering of information from “West Bengal and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board”, world-wide-web, books and from various news paper articles.
2. **Field Study:** The primary data was obtained by conducting primary survey through questionnaire survey containing both open and close ended questions on “work place culture and their social status” from the several labour market places of the city such as- Howrah station, Howrah AC market, Behala, Pathakpara, Ballygunj, Dhakuriya station, Park circus and Maheshtala etc. It is noticed that hundreds of

workers assemble at these crossings to find casual daily work. It is the place where work allocation and wage distribution take place.

3. **Post-Field Study:** After the collection of about fifty representatives' view, the analysis and interpretation of information has done with the help of various statistical techniques.

Demographic Characteristics of Sample Population

It is noticed that—

1. Out of the total respondents, most of them (about 66 per cents of respondents) are muslims while rest of them are hindu by religion.
2. Approximately, these representatives are example of each and every age group but chunk of population is between 25 to 50 years.
3. Most of them are either illiterate (32%) or having very low level of education as shown in Fig.-1.
4. One peculiar feature noticed that women labourers in the construction sector are at large scale victims of desertion by their spouse (36%) or they are widow. This has led to a high incidence of women headed households in the industry which are more poverty prone and vulnerable.

It becomes evident from the survey that the majority of these workers (about 70% of sample) are forced to migrate from their villages in search of work. This further led to permanent or semi-permanent change of residence, of this people, who are coming from the distant part of the state (Murshidabad, Hugli, Bardhaman, and Nadia etc.) or from neighbor states of Bihar, Odisha and Jharkhand. Very few of them also prefer to commute daily, who live in local villages nearer to their workplace.

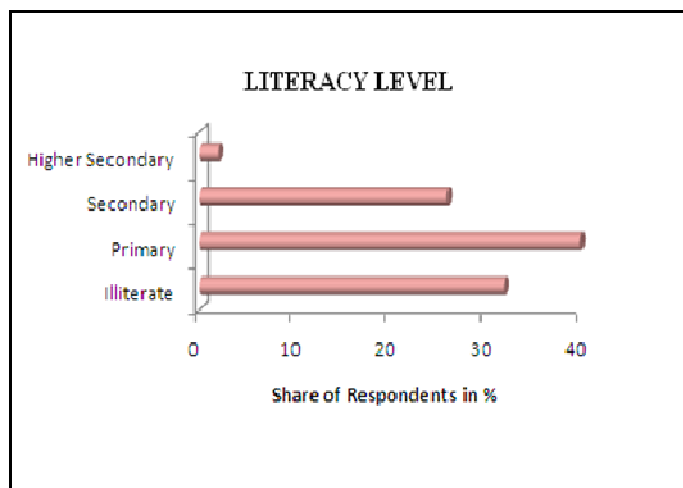


Fig. 1

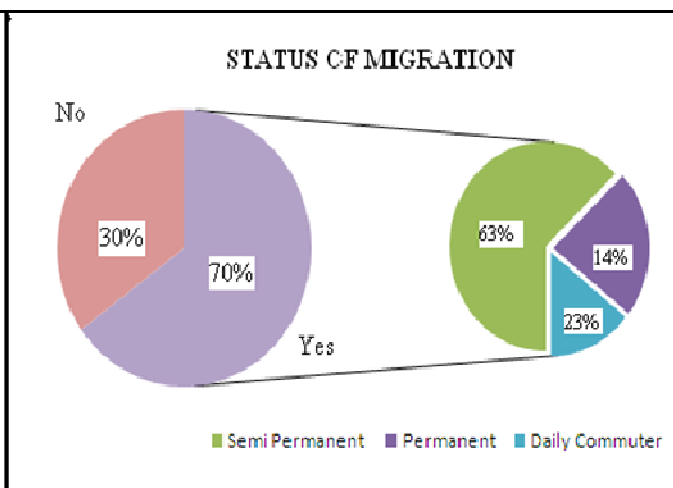


Fig.2

Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2011-12.

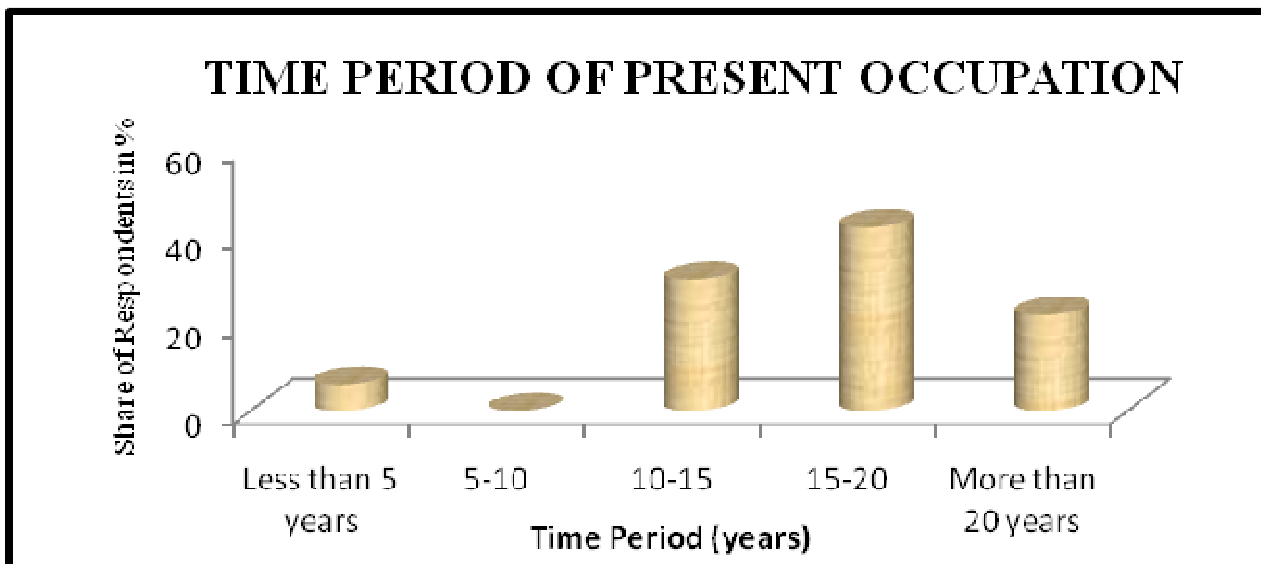


Fig.3

Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2011-12.

Workplace Culture

A workplace culture can be defined as the “way of life” at your worksite. Analysis reveals that construction sector is the one, which generates employment and absorbs unskilled, semi-skilled and rural labour and provide opportunities for seasonal employment. Such opportunities attract huge number of rural poor womenfolk to take job at site. Such workforce often can be subdivided into two subgroups, the one group whose major source of income is construction industry only; they are the “Casual Labourforce”, while another group can be named as “Extreme Casual Labourforce”, who considers working at construction site as an alternate source of income. Out of the total surveyed 12% of workforce are extreme casual workers while rests of them are casual workers. On average employment is available for 10 –15 days in a month. Respondents report that wage rates vary between Rs. 150–200 per day, often controlled by availability of work and overtime. For the sub-question on “Average daily working hours” most of them answered that they generally have to work up to 8 hours, in peak season they were required to work for longer. It is generally believed that on construction sites both women and men age early because of the hard work and rough working environment. Women also suffer the consequences of repeated child-bearing and rearing, making them weak and unable to work for too many years. But study says that about 42 per cents and 22 per cents of respondents are working at site for more than 15 to 20 years respectively. However, the opportunity of work to these old labourers decreases overtime as employer 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 severely degraded working environment, among several constraints, some basic issues are discussed as follows.

(a) Restricted Access to Basic Facility:

About 80% of respondents report that they lack proper facility of drinking water at workplace often it varies over space, or if available not so safe at all. Access to sanitary facility 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, risking heat stress and other health problems (NIOSH). Although various acts exist under which women are entitled to maternity leave and benefits, out of the total respondents no one is getting any such benefits. Thekedar 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 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.

(b) Constraints Faced 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 cents of respondents report that they are cheated by their contractors on the salary day and delaying in 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.

(c) **Hostile Workplace:**

Study reveals that about 90 per cents of these women construction labourers consider their job as 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.

(d) **Sexual Harassment at Work Place:**

Sexual harassment is a serious problem for female construction workers. 74 per cents 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.

“Abeda Bibi” (surveyed at Behala-Pathakpara) said that, “thekedars and employer usually prefer to employ younger women whom they may exploit sexually”. An extremity of demands of thekedars (contractors) can be estimated from the statement of the “Debi Sardar” (a 45 year old labour surveyed at Dhakuriya), in which she accepted that to get employment, she forced some another poor young girls to please contractors; as in turn contractors has promised her to provide regular employment opportunity and 20 per cents of extra commission on her wage for next whole year. Some reports that they are exploited by thekedars both sexually as well as economically, many time such situation 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 situation. Only about 18.92 per cents of the respondents reported about sexual harassment to their higher authority and unfortunately most of them (about 60 per cents of respondents) received negative reaction.

Table No. 1

Status	Drinking Water *	Sanitation Facility*
Available	4	15
Unavailable	16	85
Varies over space	80	0

Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2011-12; *Share of Respondents in %

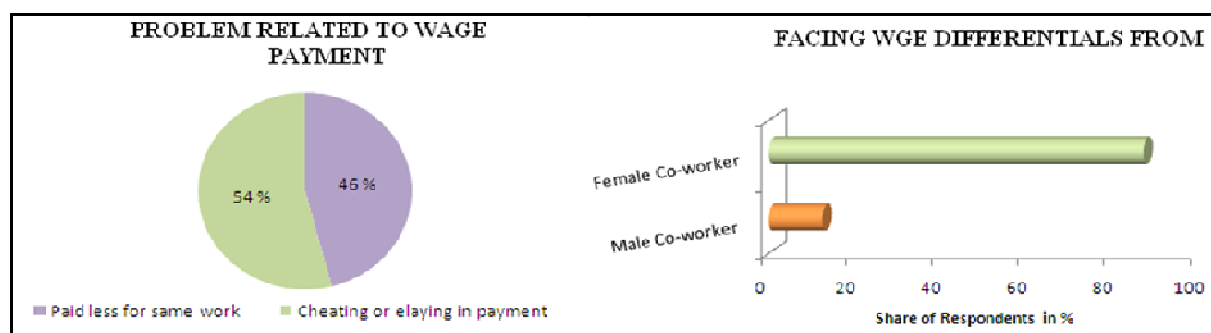


Fig. 4

Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2011-12

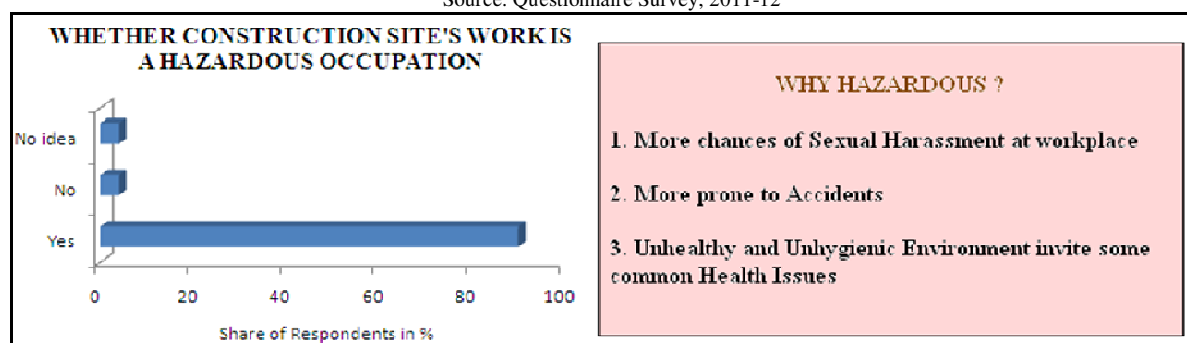


Fig. 5

Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2011-12.

(e) Accidents at Workplace:

Work related to 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 cents 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, varies over nature of employer, but basically they faced negative reaction.

(f) Common Health Hazards:

It is well known fact that working at construction site , may have negative health consequences, as it is more

expose to chronic health hazards (noise, silica, asbestos, manmade fibers, lead and other metals, hazardous waste etc.), associated with electrocution and musculoskeletal disorders (lifting, awkward postures, repetitive motion, flying or falling objects etc.) However there is lack of proper knowledge about health hazard among the construction labourers but still some of them claimed that due to 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 thekedars is an important predictor for symptoms of increased psychological and physiological distress.

(g) Low level of Job Satisfaction:

Aforesaid situation associated with construction workplace further giving birth to high level dissatisfaction among these women labourers as reported (about 82 per cents of respondents). The level of dissatisfaction can be analyzed from the fact that about 60 per cents of respondents want to leave the sector if they will get another opportunity.

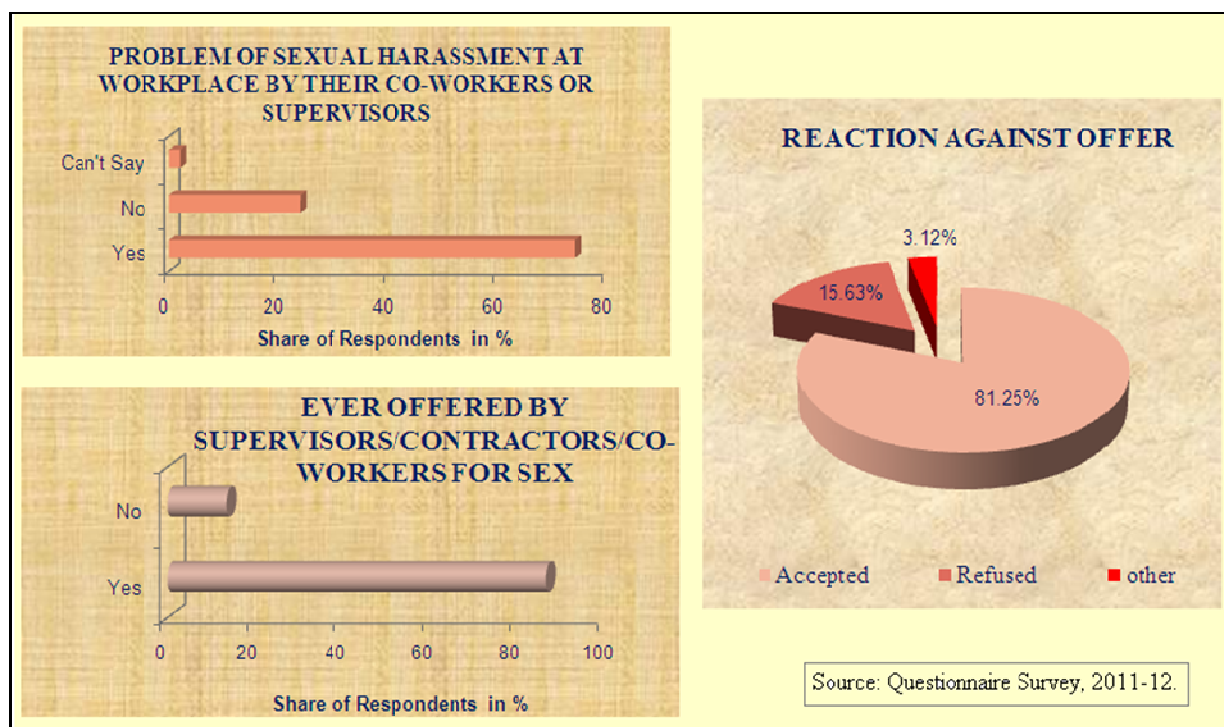


Fig. 6

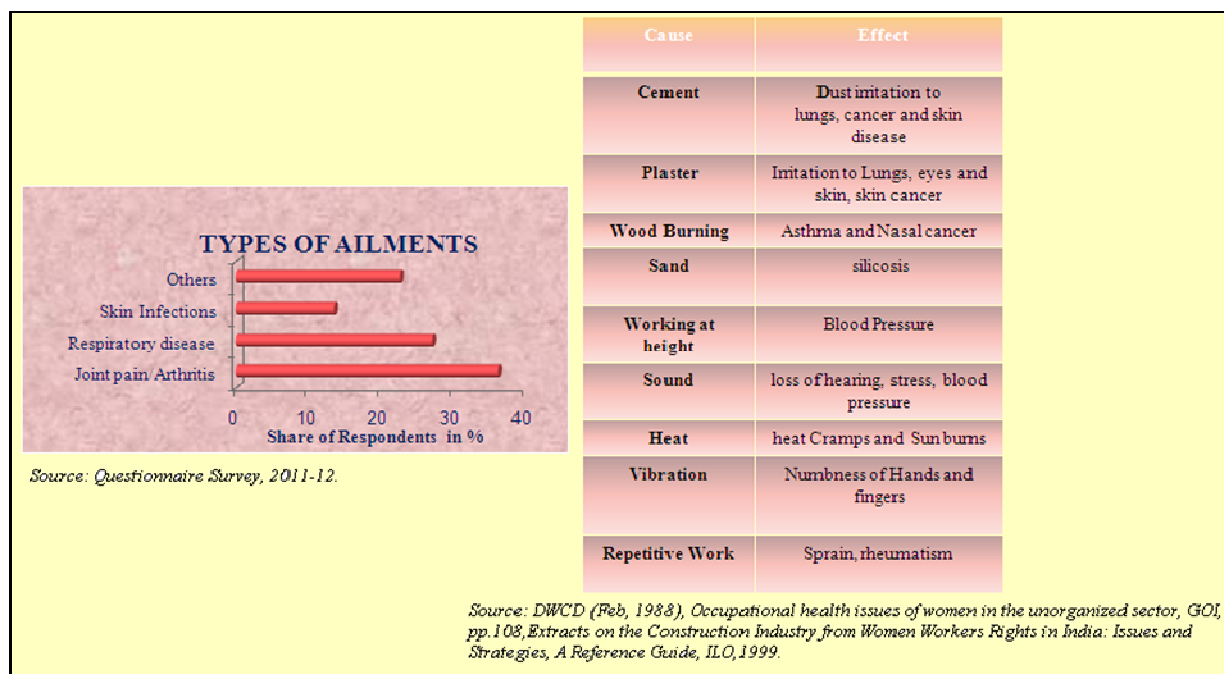


Fig. 7

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 agricultural sector. On the question why despite, such a hostile workplace, a large number of womenfolk take job at site? 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 have to take job at site. Another group is forced by poverty while few are working to improve their economic status or helping other existing members of family in construction industry. It is largely noticed that in one hand where this womenfolk lack any particular skill, one another they are forced to work in such a situation construction sector is the only industry which generates employment and absorbs unskilled, semiskilled and rural labourforce.

Status of the Women in Social Ladder

“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-

- i. 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 government.
- ii. 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, lack almost all basic amenities of sewerage, water supply and sanitation.
- iii. 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.
- iv. 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.
- v. These women are playing dual role, 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 earning 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. Only 34% of respondents report that they keep aside small fraction of their income to spend occasionally.

Table-2

Causes	Share of Respondents (%)
Forced by Poverty	40
To fulfill the dire needs of their family as she is Widow/Abandoned by husband	46
Many family members in this job	10
Own Choice to improve their Economic Status	04

Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2011-12

Their Legal Status

By the 1980s, some 25 laws governed the status of workers in the construction industry, ranging from the Inter State Migrant Workers Act to the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 and Equal Remuneration Act, 1976. In October 2005, the Labour Department, Government of West Bengal has established the “West Bengal Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board” (Regulation of Employment and Condition of Service Act) to provide safety, health and welfare measures to these construction workers. It includes various schemes for example assistance to a beneficiary in case of Accidents, Payment of Death Benefit, Pension Benefit, Medical Expenses, Maternity Benefit, and Financial Assistance for Education of their Children etc. However these Welfare Board Claims that number of beneficiaries increased from 271,870 to 466,744 from 31.03.2011 to 31.01.2012. But still out of total respondents none of them is aware about any such schemes.

What do Women Want?

In reply to questionnaires where they were asked what they wanted from the government and society, women construction workers said that —

1. They want the society and government to ensure regular decent work more safely and satisfactorily.
2. “Women friendly environment” at worksite is very much necessary so they can work more safely and satisfactorily.
3. They need relief from the exploitation of thekedars (both physically and economically).
4. 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 card is very much necessary.

Major Issues and Suggestions

It become evident that 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 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 labour power. Hundreds of workers assemble at road crossings or at stations to find casual daily work. Traffic policemen or RPF often force them to move off. 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.

Thekedars or builders are supposed to provide a crèche, separate toilets for women and proper facility of drinking water where women are employed. OSHA in 1998 reported that “Sexual Harassment” is when submission to, such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual’s employment; or rejection of, such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual; or such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual’s work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment. Findings show that such aforesaid conduct is common for all women construction labourers, therefore strong steps should be taken to stop such inhumane behavior.

The removal of occupational immobilization by empowering these women construction labourers is 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 10% 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 Tamilnadu Government, steps can be taken to train and employ these women, Governmental, Quasi-governmental agencies and non-governmental

organizations can come forward to honor 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 in 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 thekedars. There is inadequate information on the extent to which female construction workers are exposed to various health hazards at the work place, 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 laborers 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 analyzed 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 fulfill the basic objectives of various governmental 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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