



Socio Economic Characteristics of Women Construction Workers in Tamilnadu – Some Evidences

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Introduction

In India women workers constitute a major portion in the work force of the construction industry. Sad to say they remain not only unorganized but also unskilled as compared to male construction workers, who by virtue of their gender preference have progressed ahead in their career from an unskilled worker to a skilled one, specifically as a mason, carpenter, welder and electrician. While on the other hand women construction workers start as unskilled helpers and remain unskilled throughout their life and as a result are victims of gender discrimination. Traditions, culture and customs along with the attitude of society towards women have placed women workers at a great disadvantage. In addition to this, they are also unorganized and dependent on their husbands without any empowerment socially and economically. Unfortunately, in this system, women workers do not have an opportunity to receive any type of skills training which has left them stagnant without any chance of promotion or upgrade of any sort in their job. Most of the time, based on the mistaken notion that women are incapable of doing heavy or rough work, women workers loose out miserably. This type of attitude has left the women workers at the bottom of the rung of skills in the industry with no avenues of promotion or higher wages for them.

Construction workers in general have no access to formal training in the construction industry and they upgrade their skills thorough practice or by observing and working under skilled masons or carpenters etc. As a result of women being only engaged in soft skills, the gap between the skilled male workers and unskilled women workers has placed them in a position of less empowerment economically and socially. This has worked against the advancement and empowerment of women workers. Only 11% of the construction workers in India are formally skilled with a huge mass of unskilled workers.

The BWI foresaw a threat to their existence and livelihood as a result of globalization and felt an urgent need to provide women workers the necessary skills to enable them to sustain their jobs and face competition workers and found it necessary to address this issue. A series of skills training programmes were initiated for the women construction workers in Tamil Nadu. It is a 10 day programme where the last two days are dedicated to gender awareness and concepts of gender mainstreaming.

The BWI established a working arrangement with the Builders Association of India (BAI) through TCWF (TamilNadu Construction Workers Federation) a merger of 7 affiliates of Tamil Nadu) who came forward and agreed to provide skills training to construction women workers in Tamil Nadu. Accordingly BWI initiated a skill training package exclusively for women. This training started with training on painting houses. The training is on mixing of colours, brush strokes and proper techniques of painting.

There is also a positive move to go further by introducing training in other skills such as plumbing, electric wiring, masonry, carpentry and welding. This training will enable women to creep into what is known as areas for men only which are infact reserved for only men and thereby upgrade the status of women or put at par with men. This training initiatives will not only boost the confidence in women construction workers but also assist them to promote and uplift themselves in their jobs. To date, BWI has implemented four training sessions on house painting. Though the first session met with initial resistance, the impact of the training motivated the women workers to such an extent that in the third training the number of women volunteers increased beyond expectation.

The situation of India is ridden with paradoxes. Women form the poorest of the poor and yet women have run empires and states on the sub

continent. Women are socially deprived of status and yet have been venerated as Goddesses. Women are the harder race with a higher life expectancy and yet have an unfavourable sex ratio. These should be treated as paradoxes and not as indicators and averages. India has 406 million women out of the population of 844 million and 61.0 percent of Indian women are illiterates. Women form 89.0 percent of the informal and unorganised sector. Women's work participation rate is higher in the rural areas, 90.0 percent of the rural and 10.0 percent of the urban women workers are unskilled.

The Human Development Report for 2010 recently published by United Nations Development Programme, presents a gloomy picture of the status of women in the world. The most striking point is that there is not a single country where women enjoy equality with men. Women performs 11 trillion worth of unpaid or invisible economic activity world wide. According to the findings of a 31 country study, women work longer hours than men. On an average, women put in 13.0 percent more times than men in developing countries and 6.0 percent more than men in developed countries. Another finding was that of the total burden of the work, women carry, 53.0 percent and men carry 47.0 percent in developing countries and the figures of 51.0 percent and 49.0 percent for developed economies.

The discriminatatory approach towards women was still deep rooted in our society, even though our constitution guarantees them an equal rights and status. We have failed to recognize the extensive contribution of women to household and national economy as active workers, and producers of goods and services. Sex difference is linked with unequal distribution of resources towards rights and responsibilities.

Literacy and Education would sharpen women's awareness. We should also make them aware of their own potential and generate a desire in them to acquire skills that would enable them to walk shoulder to shoulder with men. Along with this, efforts should be made to educate our menfolk to treat women as equal partners in progress. A qualitative methods is the need of the hour. The Government, non-Governmental organization and menfolk at large have to play a crucial role in making gender equity reality. Equitable access to resources, power and decision making is of paramount importance.

A study revealed that nearly 85.0 per cent of the female population in the country were not able to participate adequately in economic reconstruction of nation.

Role of women in Economic Development

In the traditional society of India, woman was fully occupied with her duties as a mother and homemaker, which are termed as non-market labour. This was so small feat, since the traditional household may be described as both a production and a consumption unit. Many factors like urbanization technical progress and education have profoundly changed these traditional conditions in India. Slowly starting from the metropolitan areas, the role of woman at home has become lighter due to technical progress. The production side of women's work at home is gradually decreasing leading to a reduction of their role at home. Women constitute half of the nation's human resource and therefore vital and crucial for the national development. In the socio-economic milieu of the country, role of women within the overall context of human resource development requires their rightful role in the society;. In any society, economic position and social status of women are influenced by the extent of their involvement in income earning activities outside the household.

Sharing of economic activity by women is neither a new phenomenon nor a new development. The magnitude of their involvement however, is correlated socio economic and political conditions prevalent in a

country. From time immemorial, women in India have been working in the active economic field and indirectly contribute to the economic development. With the changes in the outlook, attitudes and approach towards living, it has now become necessary, by and large, for the families of inadequate income to supplement their requirements through traditional earnings. Women, of course, can fill this gap. Breaking social conventions and religious taboos, they have come forward to meet the challenges enthusiastically. This is, no doubt a healthy development. However, in a country like India, the process of development is bound to be little slow owing to the prevalent illiteracy and age old rigid customs and traditions.

The status of women in a society is usually measured in terms of the level of education, employment, income, health as well as role played by them in the family, community and society.

Women in Unorganised Sectors

The employment of women in the unorganized sector is divided into nine sectors: agriculture, dairy, small animal husbandry fisheries, social and agro-forestry, khadi and village industries, handlooms, handicraft and agriculture. The first five sectors are broadly classified as agriculture and allied occupations. The last four are categorized as the village and small industries sector. The number of women in the unorganized sector is many times more than that in the organized sector because of their helplessness due to lack of employment opportunities, limited skills illiteracy, and restricted mobility. Labour laws do not govern the unorganized sector. Hence, it does not guarantee security of job or terminal benefit. Many of the women are unpaid family workers. Many enterprises have shifted from the organized to unorganized sector. Among these industries are coir, cashew, bidi, jute, brick etc. With enormous market potential. The garment and construction industries also offer enormous opportunities.

Objectives:

1. To study socio-economic conditions of women construction workers.
2. To study the working conditions of women construction workers.
3. To study about the wage structure of women construction workers.
4. To study the problems faced by women construction workers.
5. To study the age wise distribution of women construction workers in the study area.

Data and Methodology

Primary data for the study were collected from a random sample of 50 women construction workers in Thuraiyur Taluk of Tiruchirapalli District in TamilNadu, during January to June 2012. The objectives for the study are pursued using simple averages and percentages. To analyze the reason for joining construction work has been estimated using Garret Ranking Techniques.

Women comprise half of the world's population and perform two thirds of the work, but earn only a third of the work, but earn only a third of the total income and own less than a tenth of the resources. The most discriminated people in the world are usually the ones who lack economic power.

Construction sector is the largest employer in the world and in India. More than 31 million people work in the construction industry, second only agricultural sector. More than 35 percent of construction workers are women and they get poor remuneration and are discriminated in the payment of wages (ILO, 2009). When men construction workers have promotional opportunities, women have no opportunities to acquire skills and become masons or supervisors.

According to the Labour and Social Trends in Asia and the Pacific (ILO, 2005), South Asia's labour force has been growing at a strong annual average of about 2.3 percent. However, labour force participation rates of South Asia remain low, compared with other sub regions in Asia and the Pacific women's share in labour force and participation in India is relatively low compared to other countries. At the same time, female unemployment rates are generally much higher than male unemployment rates within the sub region, particularly in countries where female labour force participation is still low.

Construction is the world's largest industrial employer of seven per cent of world employment and 28 per cent of Industrial employment.

The worldwide market volume of the construction sector is over USD 3 trillion, and it accounts for around 10 percent of the world's GDP. It is the largest Industrial sector in Europe (11 percent GDP) and in the US 12 percent while in the developing world it represents 2-3 percent of the GDP. In most countries 50 percent of capital investment goes to construction. The construction industry has a deservedly notorious reputation as being dirty, difficulty and dangerous, and accounts for 30-40 percent of the world's fatal injuries, while it represents around 7 percent of the world's employment (International Federation of Building & Wood workers, 2004).

The Construction sector is the largest employer in India after agricultural labour in the unorganized sector. If it is an integral part of a country's infrastructure and industrial development. The contribution of the construction industry to the economic and social life of the country is noteworthy. Besides, the construction industry generates substantial employment and provides a growth impetus to other sectors through backward and forward linkages. It is essential therefore, that this vital activity is nurtured for the healthy growth of the economy. Majority of construction workers, up to 95 per cent of them are estimated to be temporary workers and most of them are seasonal. The construction sector is one of the largest employers in the country. In 1999- 2000, it employed 17 -62 million workers, a rise of 6 million over 1993-94 (Government of India, 2002). The sector also recorded the highest growth rate in generation of jobs in the last two decades, doubling its share in total employment.

The construction industry sets in motion the process of economical growth in the country, investment in this sector contributes 6.5 percent of GDP growth. Every Rs.1 investment in the construction industry causes an increment of Rs.0.80 in GDP as against Rs.0.20 and Rs. 14 in the fields of agriculture and manufacturing industry, respectively. Statistics over the period have shown that compared to other sectors, this sector of economic activity generally creates 4.7 times increase in incomes and 7.76 times increase in employment generation potentiality. Sustained efforts by the Indian construction industry and the planning commission have led to assigning the industry status to construction today. This means formal planning and above board financial planning will be the obvious destination of the construction sector in the country, with over 31 million persons employed in it.

The construction industry in India is facing a huge shortage of manpower, especially those with skill-sets to sustain the burgeoning growth in infrastructure and housing sectors. Although the construction industry employs about 31 million people, second only to the agriculture sector, the workforce requirement is about 5 million people per year over the next seven years to sustain the current eight per cent growth rate (Manpower shortage hits construction industry, 2007 November 16). With only 10 million workers available in the country every year, the construction industry will face a heavy manpower challenge, as it requires employing 5 million people per annum. There is also dearth of contractors due to the fact that while the existing contracting agencies are overloaded attempts are not being made to form new ones.

Construction workers are one of the most numerous and vulnerable segments of the unorganized sector in India. The building and other construction workers are characterized by their inherent risk to the life and limb of the workers. The work is also characterized by its casual-nature, temporary relationship between employer and employee, uncertain working hours lack of basic amenities and inadequate welfare facilities. There is no discernible and permanent employer employee relationship in the construction sector due to the migratory nature of the labour, short duration of projects, and the numerous sub contractors, (Suchitra and Rajasekar, 2006). Usually, the Principal employer never knows who is actually working for him and nor does the workers know for whom he is working. These characteristics also influence the practice of gender discrimination, working conditions, social security, health and safety of the workers specially the women in this industry. Even though construction is considered to be one of the principal industries in the country, the workers in the industry still remain unskilled, exploited and discriminated against (Mathew, 2005).

Outside the agriculture, manufacturing and service sectors, which together employ more than 80 per cent of women workers, a significant and gradually increasing proportion of women workers are engaged in the construction sector (Shah, 2002). Among the informal sector workers, women doing construction are some of the worst victims of

discrimination and deprivation. Working on construction sites is a very difficult task. Unlike other industries where women are employed in semi-skilled or sometimes even in skilled jobs in the building industry they are employed only as unskilled labourers. The industry does not allow its women workers to acquire skills. Consequently, women begin at the lower rung of the job hierarchy and remain there till the end of their working life. They can never aspire to be good painters, masons or carpenters (John Sharma, 2002).

Women are engaged in a whole range of unskilled work, which though invisible, are unavoidable in the construction activity. They are mostly head-load workers, who carry bricks, cement, sand and water from one place to the other, sometimes over great heights along precariously balanced wooden beams or structures. This exposes them to high risks of accidents as well as physical and mental strain. They are also involved in cleaning up concreting and earth work. In construction industry unskilled men, as helpers, also do head-load, concreting and earth work, but women are usually paid less than men for equal work.

Conclusion

The job of an unskilled worker is more strenuous in the construction industry than in other manufacturing industries. As casual workers, women not only face insecurity of work but are also paid lower wages compared to their male counterparts. Minimum wage and other legislation are violated for women. Women face instability in work, they get poor remuneration discrimination in the payment of wages and virtual absence of enforcement of protective labour legislation. Their work is regarded as unskilled, but they are given no opportunity to acquire skills on the job. Usually, women workers in construction industry have to assume multiple burdens of household work, looking after children and work in the sites to earn a living. More than 35 percent of the construction workers are women (ILO, 200/a). Unlike other industries where women are employed in semi-skilled or sometimes even in skilled jobs in the construction industry they are employed only as unskilled labourers.