

**Problems of Women Construction Workers
"Measures for Welfare of Women Construc-
tion Workers: Role of Government and
Voluntary Organizations.**

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The problem of construction site workers in general, begin the moment they leave their ancestral homes to enter cities. This mobility is not so much out of their free choice as out of helpless and compelling situations. The contributing factors leading to enforced exodus are mostly economic in nature like inability of the local resource to provide gainful employment to increasing population, ever increasing debts almost impossible to be cleared off within the existing means, death of a chief bread earner etc. Sometimes, however, social, religious and even natural/man made disasters have also their share in forcing migration to cities. Yet, quite a few do venture out enticed by the agents/contractors who show rosy pictures of easy money and soft work in the urban areas. Women workers hardly have a voice to exert in the matter. They tow the line their husbands and parents take and normally adjust with circumstances much better than men do, attributing all pains and pleasure to fate. Besides, women workers prefer to be with their husbands braving untold suffering with a grudge rather than stay back with the in-laws.

Once they come face to face with the realities of life their hopes are shattered. Ashamed to return back (And to What? most of them being landless labour, have hardly anything to fall back upon) they form a highly exploited social group, dancing to the tune of ruthless exploitation. With no alternative in sight, they come to terms with the present and prefer to exist at the mercy of the contractors.

The construction site workers are mostly illetrate and do not have a permanent job and a regular income. Often contractors deliberately keep them off from the jobs 4 days to a week in a month, thus making them very much dependent. This fear of insecurity often compels them to sign for more than they really receive. Women are paid still less than the men, though they may be working at par with them, their income is treated as supplementary and not main. Equal pay for equal work may be high sounding and quite impressive on paper but in practice, the ideal is broken at very stage with no one to protest and protect.

Most of the workers take loans to meet the high cost of minimum standard of living, commission cuts to the middlemen for securing and retaining jobs with the contractors and a fairly big chunk of their income (including that of the women workers) goes to pay off the loans and interests there on. Then there are loans to pay off loans, to meet emerging needs, remittances to homes and to meet the uneconomic expenditure on the (avoidable) social obligation. Women workers have, on the one hand, added to the loan problem for their inability to cut off from the social customs and on the other hand have contributed actively by earning on their own and paying off (in parts) the loans contracted for the family's needs. The result is that the net amount received is often much less than the minimum wage.

Because of the compelling situation, economic (low income, insecurity of job and hardly any prospects for progress), physical limitation (housing shortages and other amenities) health and sanitation (inadequacy of medical facilities, general cleanliness, potable water, drainage, leading to acute slum

conditions), the workers continue to live under inhumane conditions. The worst sufferers are the women and children. On the top of it, since the contract labour does not have a permanent address, they do not get ration cards which makes them spend much more on provisions than any other groups and the fact that they buy their rations piecemeal every day, hits hard on their limited resources.

The make shift accommodations which are often not close to work site, again depleats their income as they have to pay for their own travel arrangements to report for duty and return. It taxes heavily on their time, energy and savings.

The lot of women of this group is even more oppressive. The problems of their existence are particularly harsh for women, who bear the brunt of not only their economic problems, but also deal with its ramifications in their domestic life. The women not only work with the men on the site but also, in addition to this look after the children, run house and perform other shadow task like collecting firewood, water etc.

A major problem of women construction site working is their status as unskilled workers. In most other work settings, especially in the organised sector, women can aspire to become semi-skilled, even skilled workers. But in the construction business they remain throughout unskilled workers. It is important to note that in this industry, unskilled work is far more strenuous physically, since most of the unskilled tasks involve carrying heavy loads, breaking stones, pumping water, etc.

The other problems which the women face refer primarily to their domestic life. Fuel wood is a major problem - they have to collect it from their work place or from road sides. Buying it is not always feasible, especially in Delhi which has the highest price for firewood in the country. It is a common sight to see women construction workers carrying babies in arms and loads of broken tree branches, twigs and discarded wooden pieces on their heads daily on their way back homes.

Another serious problem relates to drinking and cooking water. Since they are located in makeshift camps which are often unauthorised, no legal arrangement for water can be done. At best one or two hand pumps are illegally installed at relative bigger camp sites only, with no assurance of good hygienic potable water. With the result quite a few inmates, particularly children suffer from water borne diseases. If they approach any nearby slum colony for water they are discouraged since this upsets the fringe arrangements there.

Rations and provision pose another problem. Since they are seasonal workers with no fixed abode, they are not entitled to get ration cards, Furthermore, since they are paid daily they buy their provisions piecemeal and end up paying far more for it than any other section of the society. Not having ration cards has other implications - they cannot apply for concessional bus passes, they cannot get coal or kerosene oil at controlled rates which are much lower than in the open market, etc. Even the meals are cooked under most unhygienic conditions - usually exposed to dust and flies.

Medical facilities for women (or for that matter the construction site workers on the whole) are non-existent. They have to go to local doctors near their camps for treatment. These doctors are rarely adequately qualified and invariably more expensive than the qualified ones. The women have no ante-natal care and go on working on the site till the last month, and many continue till the last week. Once the child is delivered, they go back to their work rapidly since they cannot afford to lose their job or their salary for many days. They have to take their children to work and leave them at one corner of the site to sleep or play with the slightly older children - older refers here to children still less than 12-13 years since those nearing 15 tend to start working. Since there are hardly any official creche or arrangement to look after the young ones, the mothers put them on the drugs to sleep off the working hours. This results in improper development of mind and body besides making them drug addicts right from the tender age.

Since women have to carry out most of the all types of work almost round the clock, they tend to develop an indifferent outlook towards their own health resulting in most of them turning anemic, ill nourished, half fed, over worked and over worried. Often too tired to function normally they are subject to harsh treatment from their husbands. Wife beating is quite a common practice and unfortunately accepted by the women workers as a normal family feature. She continues to bear all humiliation without a complaint.

Alcoholism and smoking (bidies and even hukka) amongst women workers is quite common and usually the cheapest indigenous products are consumed. It leaves its own impact on the health of the women and children.

One of the major problems they face is in child rearing. There are no family and child welfare counselling services, hardly no creche facilities and literally no medical facilities. Above all no statutory welfare measures provided for their protection as in the case of organised workers in the industries. The other problems lie in the areas of work place, food preparation, and health,

Suggestions for improving the conditions of women construction workers :

1. Drinking water: Temporarily water connections may be provided for making the Municipal Committee filtered water available through taps. Wherever this is not possible, filtered water may be supplied through tanks and other sources. This will ensure checking on the use of dirty and contaminated water, thereby reducing the extent of various water borne diseases.
2. Washing and bathing facilities : At present no separate arrangements are made by the contractors. Women workers wash and bathe at a common place primarily meant at best for community drinking water. Open bathing makes persons susceptible to various exposure and may cause serious physical ailments besides denying them of any privacy. Separate covered decent structures should be provided for women workers. The drainage system should ensure that there is no place for stagnation of water, breeding of insects and germs.

3. Laterines and Urinals : Instead of continuing the existing open unregulated system, there should be closed laterines and urinals separate for women workers, both at the work site as well as camp site. These should be built keeping in mind the sanitary conditions and adequate privacy for the users. Depending on the land situation the laterine could be bore hole, trench type, sulabh sauchalaya or any other type suitable for the situation. Strict discipline should be carried out to see that such facilities are properly utilized.

4. Shelters : Since most of the construction work is a sort of continuous work, one job completed, the next work follows, though it may be at a different place. The workers are almost the same, may be a little more or less. With fairly big size contractors the camp site does not change too frequently - only the place of work changes. In such cases, the camps should be provided with better residential accommodation and should not be just another slum. Even the tented or thatched accommodation can be orderly and decent, caring for the basic needs of human beings, i.e. minimum decent floor space, privacy space for cooking, bathing etc. with proper lighting, ventilation and security. Such areas should have some additional essential benefits for the workers, available within the camp area or nearby e.g. market facilities for basic items, rations/Air Price Shops, fuel, first aid and medical facilities, creche, canteen etc.

5. Creche : At a few selected places creche facilities have been provided mostly with the help of voluntary bodies, these should be a part of the statutory provisions, compulsorily to be provided by the contractor in every Labour camp where

10 or more children need such facilities. Such creache should have the services of an ayya/mid wife to take care of the children during the working hours with all the services and facilities provided for the child as under the factories Act,48, All expenses should be borne by the contractor. If this is analysed objectively, it will turn out to be an asset and not a liability as feared at present. The women workers will be able to pay full attention to their work and turn on better production rather than playing truent on the mere pretext of nursing the child and psychologically worried of their health and safety.

6. Canteen: To be operated at subsidized or no profit no loss basis. The idea is to make available snacks and essential items of food to the workers at cheaper than market rates, thereby saving their time, money and energy for this daily tiring and monotonue routine, If such a facility does not tax their purse unduly adversely, the workers can utilize their time in a better social and economic way.

7. Accident and First Aid: Both at the work site and at the camp site the health and physical fitness of the workers have to be safe-guarded. Because of the manual nature of work, minor and sometimes major injuries are bound to occur. While the entire problem can be looked at from the preventive and safety point of view, it is essential that treatment of injuries should not be undermin, or delayed. Even minor injuries can become septic, aggravating the sufferings of the injured, causing loss of wage and multiplying treatment expenses, when all this could have been avoided, if on-th-spot treatment would have been made available on time. Initial treatment of minor injuries can never be a cause of major expenses but if left unattended or delayed

it would be catastrophic. Further all injuries and accident cases must be entered properly on the register and action taken thereon be recorded. Even, for minor ailments like pulled muscles, sprain, head-ache, stomach-ache, diarrhoea etc. a right treatment on time can be a great relief and saver in the long run.

8. Safety: Workers working on jobs must be trained to handle their jobs safely and if necessary safety equipments may be supplied to them. To believe that unskilled jobs do not require any safety device is not correct. Even breaking bricks and stones, where mostly women workers work, the maximum injuries are from the hammer hitting the hand/fingers. Certainly a hard, hurt-proof hand glove may save a number of workers from temporary disablement. Many more similar examples can be cited. All that is needed is safe handling of even minor not-so-safe jobs and improved humane attitude towards the safety and better living conditions of their workers (both men and women).

9. Adult Education: Women workers should be provided with all such functional knowledge and skill as would make them aware of the developmental activities carried out in other parts of the country/world, directly or indirectly benefitting the working class women. They should be made aware of their role in society, family and the rights and privilege the country's constitution, the law and the society provides them. They should know what are the social ills and how to overcome them. Family welfare, child care, health education, family budgeting, better house keeping etc. are some of the subjects which need to be introduced in order to make them participate effectively in raising their standard of life. Literacy is a must and should be given top

priority. Voluntary social welfare organisations can be more successful in bringing about the necessary change. An educated women will no doubt run her home better and would inspire her children to go to schools and turn out better persons who may facilitate the necessary social changes more quickly.

Statutory measures ensuring minimum facilities and their strict compliance will go a long way in improving the existing conditions. There is no greater social crime than exploiting the women and unorganised and women constitute a fairly large size of such an exploited group.

The Government can pass :

1. rules and regulations necessary for improving the lot of exploited group.
2. see the proper implementation of statutory provisions.
3. punish the violators.
4. amend the legal provision from time to time as per the socio-economic and legislative needs of the situation and
5. encourage voluntary organisations to take an active role in bringing about the necessary changes.

In a vast country like ours, the Government alone can not be effective unless actively supported by voluntary organizations. It must visualise the need of the time, frame policies make rules and decide on actions. It can not, however, implement without the cooperation of people, voluntary bodies and like. The two are complementary and supplementary to each other.