

## Double burden of harsh work and gender issues faced by underprivileged women workers in unorganized work section

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### ARTICLE INFO :

#### Article history :

Received : 08.02.2012  
Sent for revision : 15.03.2012  
Accepted : 04.05.2012

#### Key words :

Unorganized work sector,  
Underprivileged, Unskilled work,  
Gender biased issues

#### How to cite this Article :

Karuna, Bharara, Sandhu, Pushpinder and Bal, Sharanbir (2012). Double burden of harsh work and gender issues faced by underprivileged women workers in unorganized work section, *Adv. Res. J. Soc. Sci.*, 3 (1) : 47 - 50.

### ABSTRACT

Working women have to bear the double burden of domestic and work life in all walks of profession. If the employment is in unorganized work sector, specially in construction sector, her condition can be very pathetic. Present study was therefore conducted to examine their work and working conditions and commonly prevalent gender biased issues they have to face at construction sites in Punjab state; where they generally migrate with family and work as a group. Eighty such women were personally interviewed with the help of pre-structured interview schedule and results statistically analyzed. Results revealed that maximum number of respondents (58 %) were able to earn more than Rs. 4000/- per month. However, their assets were negligible as most of them lived in temporary huts and hardly few of them possessed a cycle. They were all engaged in unskilled manual work as 3/4<sup>th</sup> of the respondents were just carrying concrete cement and crushing stones. 60-70 per cent of these women were engaged in brooming the site, carrying bricks, sorting and washing bricks and mixing concrete cement. Use of foul language, fearing of touching of body parts, intentional degrading and hostile attitude of male workers and employers were the commonly under reported gender biased issues as experienced by more than 50 per cent respondents. Therefore, there is a strong need to draw the attention of government and non government agencies for immediate redressed to their plight.

## INTRODUCTION

Underprivileged women are the deprived ones lacking opportunities or advantages enjoyed by other women. In a still developing country like India, this category of women is in abundance owing to lack of education and their low socio-economic status. In the urban areas, these women are primarily employed in the unorganized sectors. According to Census of India 2001, number of such women workers outnumber women workforce in organized sector. Majority of these women are engaged in agriculture, construction and domestic services.

As per the survey carried out by National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) 60<sup>th</sup> Round (2001), total employment in both organized and unorganized sectors in the country was in the order of 39.7 crore. Out of this, 36.9 crore were in the

unorganized sector (1.7 crore were employed in construction industry). This occupation spontaneously comes to them when they migrate with family for employment in cities. However, these women remain underprivileged in terms of economic parity and low gender biased status, even when she tries to sharing responsibility with males of the family. She is merely employed as unskilled labourer, a helping hand to husband or male coworkers and paid lowly (Chauhan and Sharma, 2003).

According to 60<sup>th</sup> NSSO Round (2001), these women work mostly as unskilled workers hired mainly to carry concrete and bricks. Work on construction sites is invariably divided along gender lines. The types of work that men do are labeled as 'skilled' work and fetch higher wages than the work that women are allowed to do. Women are restricted to stone crushing, fetching and carrying of materials and this type of work is

labeled as 'unskilled' work and earn lower wages.

According to an Indian Labour Organization (2009) study, women workers in the construction industry do the most strenuous and 'unskilled' jobs. Study states that the conditions of women construction workers are pathetic. They usually suffer occupational hazards due to poor working conditions and the lack of special facilities to suit female needs. In addition, within the general context of construction workers and their plight, women workers suffer active exploitation on various accounts, even amounting to sexual harassment (GUPTA and SANDHU, 2010). Very scanty research explores such issues, their working conditions, problems and gender biased working scenario they have to cope up with. Therefore, the present study was planned with the following specific objectives in mind: to examine working conditions of women engaged in construction industry, to study types of activities women are hired for at construction sites and to explore gender biased issues faced by women workforce in construction industry.

## METHODS

The study was conducted in 2011 in randomly selected two sites, one within and another in outer skirts of Ludhiana city. A sample consisting of 80 female workers upto the age of 40 years engaged in construction industry as unskilled labourer were selected from 8 randomly selected construction sites. Four sites were taken from within and another four from outer skirts of Ludhiana city. These sites were: construction sites for auditorium and international guest house at PAU; a showroom in Ghumar Mandi; a Shopping complex at Bharat Nagar Chawk; industry at Jalandhar bypass; a showroom at Samrala Chawk; a Mall at Ambala Road and Basant Avenue extension between Pakhowal and Dugri Road. The average number of female workers was 10 from each site, thus comprising total sample of 80 workers. Pre-tested interview schedule was used to seek both background and specific information from the selected respondents. Collected data were analyzed and interpreted using frequency and percentage and mean scores.

## OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

The findings of the present study as well as relevant discussion have been summarized under following heads:

### Demographic features of women workers in construction industry:

The data in Table 1 indicates that majority of the respondents (55.00 %) were in the age group of 21-30 years, followed by 37.50 per cent who were of 31-40 years. Madhok (2005) also indicated in her report on National Commission on Women, that none of the women was over 40 years of age, as contractors prefer young women only. She further disclosed

**Table 1: Demographic features of respondents (n=80)**

Demographic features	No.	%age
<b>Age (years)</b>		
Up to 20	6	7.50
21-30	44	55.00
31-40	30	37.50
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	78	97.50
Unmarried	2	2.50
<b>Family type</b>		
Joint	32	40.00
Nuclear	48	60.00
<b>Education</b>		
Literate	0	0.00
Illiterate	80	100.0

\*multiple responses

that as construction work is extremely taxing, most of the women are young (average age 25) having joined the workforce even before they reached their teens. Majority (97.50%) of the respondents were married. It was probably due to the fact that when men migrated to construction sites, they brought their wives along, so married women were part of major female workforce.

Caste is an independent cohesion of any society, and people generally want to live and move as a cohesive group. In the present study, all the respondents belonged to scheduled caste. It may be due to the reason that this caste was characterized very low socio-economic status and thus they had no other option than to join unorganized work force. Madhok (2005) too reported that the rural groups most likely to migrate in search of work are those who own the least land or are landless labourers. SC and ST are the largest landless groups in rural India, so they are likely to comprise a significant section of construction workers. Table 1 further elucidates that 60.00 per cent of the respondents belonged to nuclear family. Since generally workers migrated to work site as couples, they hardly brought along their extended families and parents for paucity of living space, hence nuclear families dominated. It was also conspicuous to note that all the respondents were illiterate. Madhok (2005) too presented similar results.

### Socio-economic profile of respondents:

It was observed from Table 2 that 72.50 per cent respondents had income more than ' 4000/- and very small number of respondents (5.00 %) had less income (below ' 3000/-). These findings give a positive picture of economic status of female labourers in the state as NWC report consolidated earnings of female construction workers to the merger of Rs. 975/- per month; which is not even one fourth of earnings of

Personal income (₹)/month	No.	%age
<3000	4	5.00
3000-4000	18	22.50
4000 and above	58	72.50
<b>Family income (₹)</b>		
<5000	10	12.50
5000-10000	70	87.50
<b>Assets</b>		
Kaccha house	48	60.00
Temporary hut/slum dwelling	54	67.50
Cycle	10	12.50
<b>Liabilities</b>		
Loan taken	2	2.50

\*multiple responses

respondents in present study.

Family income has been worked out by considering income from all sources *i.e.* income of head of the family and other members every month. Table 2 indicates that out of total sample, 87.50 per cent of the families had income of Rs. 5000-10000/- and only 12.50 per cent of the families with income upto ' 5000/-'. It seems that women contributed to almost half of the family income where both worked as a couple at construction site.

While assessing the assets owned by the respondents, it was found that 67.50 per cent of the respondents had temporary huts to live while 60.00 per cent of the respondents had kaccha house and merely *i.e.* 12.50 per cent of the respondents had a cycle. The report (by NWC) supports these findings, as most of the families were living in 'jhugis' at construction only. Very poor profile of their assets seems to be major propelling factor in their engagement in such harsh work sector. As far as their liabilities are concerned, the data in Table 2 further indicate that only 02.50 per cent of the respondents had a loan to pay. These findings are however in contradiction to NWC report which shows these women heavily indebted. Probably better overall economic scenario of the state is the reason for this disparity.

#### **Job content of work at construction site:**

Most conspicuous revealing fact of Table 3 was that none of the women was employed in any skillful manual work. It was mainly because they are considered just load carriers or helpers at construction site and categorized by men as 'unskilled workers' (NSSO round, 2001). The table discusses about the content of work at construction site. It can be easily deduced from this table that three-fourth of the respondents were involved in stone crushing and carrying of cement concrete. Seventy per cent of the respondents were found to be engaged in brooming the site and 67.50 per cent of the respondents

Job content	No.	%age
Carrying cement concrete	60	75.00
Stone crushing	60	75.00
Brooming site	56	70.00
Carrying bricks	54	67.50
Sorting bricks	50	62.50
Washing bricks/ stones	50	62.50
Mixing cement concrete	48	60.00
Watering cement concrete	32	40.00

were found to be carrying bricks. It was found that almost same number of the respondents (62.50%) each, were engaged in sorting of bricks and washing bricks/stones. This may be due to the fact that the same person was responsible for sorting and washing of bricks/stones. Sixty per cent of the respondents were found to be engaged in the work of mixing cement concrete and only 40.00 per cent were responsible for watering cement concrete.

However in Madhok's (2005) report, women are employed in almost all the work related to the construction process. They help in removing over-ground materials once excavated, carry water, sand, cement mixture for foundation laying and concrete pouring etc., carry stones, bricks and tools required at the premises. Women also help in the erection of scaffolding by carrying centering materials, do the smoothening of surfaces with available local materials before concrete mixture is poured for roofings and once a structure is laid, do the curing operations etc.

#### **Different gender biased issues experienced by the working women:**

Table 4 discusses different gender biased issues experienced by the working women at construction sites. While probing the results, it was found that the highest mean score (3.58) was assigned by the respondents to the problem of 'foul language' being used by the male workers; this can be attributed to the fact that the workers come from a backward class and were illiterate. Martino (2002) also found that the female workers were highly affected by bullying, mobbing, verbal abuse, and violence by male co-workers and employers leading to moral suppression, frustration and anxiety.

Majority of respondents disclosed that sometimes they also feared 'touch in an inappropriate way' by their male co-workers (frequency mean score 2.82). Although generally they worked as couple, still due to type of work they were handling knowingly or unknowingly the body parts of the workers rubbed against each other, which they detested. There were also frequent incidences of 'intentional degrading' (mean score

**Table 4 : Occurrence and intensity of gender biased issues experienced by the women working at construction site**

Gender biased issues	Mean	SD	Overall rank
Foul language	3.58	0.92	1
Fearing of touching body parts	2.82	0.67	2
Intentional degrading	2.70	0.82	3
Coworker/employer is hostile	2.62	0.80	4
Exposure to difficult jobs	2.50	0.68	5
Making fun	2.32	0.65	6
Commenting	2.15	0.42	7
Misguidance by male workers	2.05	0.45	8
Invading privacy	2.05	0.31	8
No special consideration given	2.03	0.42	9
Whistling	0.98	0.35	10

2.70), which was probably due to low status of these women and partly due to jealousy among males as women were able to shoulder work which was considered domain of males only. They generally looked at the opportunities to degrade them by taunting at women workers. 'Coworkers or employers hostile attitude' was another gender biased issue these women had to face frequently as they assigned 2.62 mean score to this issue.

Men missed no opportunity to harass them was felt by majority of the respondents (mean score 2.50) as they knowingly exposed them to difficult jobs. Other frequently occurred gender biased issues as created by male workers were: making fun and commenting on female labourers; invading their privacy and misguiding them (mean scores 2.32, 2.15, and 2.05, respectively). Least bothersome gender issue was 'whistling' (mean score 0.98). This may be because the women were generally accompanied by their husbands, hence direct and obvious attempts of harassment were not dared by male co-workers and employers. However, no reporting of dirty jokes or double meaning talks, dirty signaling, molesting and winking by male co-workers or employers was made by the respondents. This may be because either they did not experience such issues or did not want to talk about these.

Thus, it can be intervened that verbal abuse was more because of their low socio-economic status and women have to bear gender biasness due to their low status in society. Madhok (2005) too reported that the insecure nature of

employment, particularly for women, creates a vicious trap in which women are often forced to please a sub-contractor in order to get work. Contractors prefer younger women, both because they can work faster and because they are more attractive. Sexual exploitation is rife, given the insecurity of a daily wage system. They find it difficult to find work because the contractors prefer good-looking women. They only hire women who speak to them nicely, the rest do not get work. On the worksite the *Thekedar* and *Munshi* misbehave. Findings of COX and Griffiths (2001) are also in line with present study.

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