

WOMEN CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN KERALA - A STUDY OF THRISSUR CITY IN KERALA STATE

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Abstract

The informal sector has made a spectacular growth in India employing nearly ninety percent of the total employed workforce. A large proportion of socially and economically underprivileged sections of society are working in the unorganized sectors especially the construction sector. Though males are employed in construction sites as skilled and unskilled workers, women are mainly engaged as helpers and coolies supporting males in their job. The paper points out that with some personal and occupational problems for the women employed in the construction sector, the employment has brought in many changes in the lives of the women and has led to greater improvements in their socio economic status. It is also to be noted that women construction workers in Kerala are better placed than their counterparts in other states and have attained a greater degree of empowerment.

Key words: *construction sector, women, socio economic*

Introduction

Unorganised sector constitutes an important part of the Indian economy. More than 90 per cent of workforce and about 50 per cent of the national product are accounted for by the unorganised sector. A high proportion of socially and economically underprivileged sections of society are working in these unorganized sectors. According to Census 2011, women constitute 48.46 percent of the total population in India and about 25.67 percent of female population is designated as workers and a majority of them are employed in unorganised sectors. The condition of women in unorganised sectors are miserable as they work for extremely low wages, with no job security and other social security benefits, long working hours and unsatisfactory working conditions.

Construction sector is one of the largest employers in the unorganised sector next to agriculture. The shares of the services and construction sectors in employment, in India increased in the period 1993-94 to 2009-10 from 19.70 per cent to 25.30 per cent and 3.12 per cent to 9.60 per cent respectively. Males are employed in construction sites as skilled and unskilled workers. Skilled workforce in construction sites includes carpenters, masons, electricians, plumbers, concrete workers, welders and so on. Unskilled workers are categorized as helpers and coolies. Women are mainly engaged as helpers and coolies supporting males in their job.

Kerala is a state known for its high literacy, both male and female and a sex ratio in favour of females. Even in the midst of social progress, the female employment level is low in Kerala when compared to other states in the country. But majority of the employed females are engaged in unorganised sector and construction sector provides an important source of livelihood for large number of females with low educational status and poor family background. The peculiarity of the Kerala economy is that the wages are very high in comparison to other states of the country. Lured by high wages, a large number of migrants both male and female have been flocking to Kerala for better standard of living. Considering the increasing construction activities in the state, the sector has helped shape the destiny of large number of families.

Review of literature

Barnabas, Annette, Anbarasu, D. Joseph, and Clifford Paul S. (2009), points out that there is an inherent gender bias against women in the construction sector and women workers are often considered unfit for male dominated skills. Though in the present day opportunities are available for female workers for skill enhancement, the social forces have prevented such a move.

Santosh Nandal, (2006) focuses on the socio-economic problems being faced by a section of the women workers in construction industry. The women workers face have a very tough life despite being hard earning members of the family.

Dileep Kumar M. (2013) describes the pathetic condition of the migrated construction workers as they are constantly exposed to accidents, ill-health, extreme level of harassment and poor quality of work life. This qualitative research paper provides insight into the plight of construction laborers in general and the action to be taken by the authorities in with specific considering the outrageous state of common workers

Objectives of the study

The study is proposed with the following objectives-

1. To examine the socio economic profile of female workforce employed in the construction sector.
2. To enquire about the work in the construction sites and the problems faced by women.
3. To analyse the socio economic empowerment of women employed in construction sites.

Significance of the study

Kerala is often known for its high social development despite low economic advancement. Women in the state are in much better position compared to the women in other states of the country. But it is to be noted that despite the superior status enjoyed by

the women of Kerala their level of participation in economic activity is low. Women from poor families are engaged in unorganized sectors like agricultural labourers, housemaids, construction workers and so on. The employment has brought in much changes in the lives of the women and has led to greater improvements in their socio economic status especially in providing a reasonably good existence for their next generation

Methodology

The paper is based on primary survey. The primary data is collected from a sample of 100 respondents working as coolies or helpers in private construction sites in Thrissur city- the cultural capital of Kerala. The study is both quantitative and qualitative. The sample survey was conducted on basis of pre structured schedules and personal interviews with the respondents.

Thrissur which is taken as the study area is the centre of trade and commerce in Kerala and there is a large progress in the field of construction with the increasing demand for infrastructure, enhancement in living standards and increasing foreign remittance inflow. A large number of migrant labourers are also flocking to the city and is employed in the construction sector along with the local male and female workforce.

Findings

Socio Economic profile

Majority of the female workforce employed in the construction sector belonged to the age group 45-60. Sixty Six percent belonged to the age group 45-60 and twenty five percent belonged to the age category 30-45. This points out that increased family responsibilities have made women take up jobs in the construction sector. Only four of the respondents of the sample are between age 18-30. The younger generations of females have higher preference for jobs like sales girls or work in small industrial units. The unskilled women have another option of being domestic help in the households with good remuneration.

Eighty one percent of the respondents are married and eleven percent are widows or divorcees. The educational qualification indicates that female construction workers are unskilled and have low level of qualification. This has prevented them from going for other productive occupations. Eighty percent of the respondents have qualification below SSLC/Class X, thirteen percent have SSLC/ Class X as highest qualification. Only one person in the sample is technically qualified.

Table 1
Age and Educational Qualification

Variable	Percent of Respondents
Age	
18-30	8
30-45	24
45-60	66
60 above	2
Educational Qualification	
Illiterate	1
Schooling	79
SSLC	13
+2/pre-degree	6
others	1

Source: Primary Survey

Seventy Six percent of the respondents have an average of 5-8 members in the family and eighty four percent has 2 or more earning members including the respondent. Sixteen percent of them are sole earning members of the family. They are mainly widows, divorcees or women whose husbands are sick or invalid. Some of them have their sons and daughters as earning members.

Table 2
Reasons for working

Financial	Death of husband	Drinking habit of husband	Better living standards	Others
86	4	2	6	2

Source: Primary Survey

Ninety three percent of the respondents have pointed out finance as main reason for working, six percent work for improving their living standards.

2. Work in the Construction Sector

The survey was conducted on female coolies or helpers in the construction sites; hence the job profile shows all of them as unskilled labourers.

The respondents have opted construction sector for its high wages than other occupations with their limited skill. Seventy two percent have marked their preference as higher wages nineteen percent have pointed out that they lack skills required for other jobs. Five percent have opted the sector for availability of work and four percent have their parents or husbands who were working in this field.

Nine percent of the respondents have been in the construction sector for past 5-12 years and fifty five percent of the respondents have been in the field for 12-20 years and thirty six percent have worked for more than 20 years. This indicates that younger generation has less preference for the work in the sector.

Table 3
Work in Construction Sector

Variable	Percent
Reason for opting Construction sector	
High Wages	72
Less Skill	19
Availability of Work	5
Husband /parents employed in the field	4
Number of Years of Work in construction sector	
5-12	9
12-20	55
More than 20 years	36
Number of Days of Work in a Week	
4	2
5	88
6	6
7	4
Problems faced in work sites	
No proper sanitation facilities	56
Heavy and Strenuous work	79
Problems with co workers	13
Low wages	9
Problems with employers	6

Source: Primary Survey

Eighty eight percent of the workforce stated that they were able to work 5 days a week. Four percent work all the 7 days. Though work was available for all the 7 days in some work sites, due to personal and health problems and a preference for leisure made these workers to work on an average 5 days a week. The women labourers do face certain problems at the work place fifty six percent point out lack of sanitation seventy nine percent point out the work is heavy and strenuous. Problems with co workers and employers, low wages are some other issues of the workforce.

Several of the labourers are under one contractor or employer at different sites for years. Often the workers become so close to each other and they find their work place to share their joys and sorrows during leisure times.

The continuous strenuous work poses danger to the health of the women. Eighty eight percent suffer from joint pain and back ache, sixty three percent suffer from gynecological disorders. Seventy percent suffer from respiratory disorders. Other health problems include headache, skin diseases, injuries and so on. These women are more concerned about their families and hence resort to medical health only under extreme circumstances

3. Socio Economic Empowerment

Female construction workers in Kerala are privileged lot with a reasonably good wages of between Rs 400 to Rs 600 on daily basis, ninety two percent get wages between these ranges. There is no one getting wage below Rs 300 per day. The female workers earn less than their male counterparts. The respondents feel that they are economically empowered as they are earning well to fully or partially support their family eighty eight percent points out they have saving. Though several of them have bank accounts (they operate it for government schemes) majority of them save through Chit funds forty eight percent save money in form of gold for marriage of children. Only twelve percent save in form of bank deposits as they find it difficult to go and deposit money and also they are not accustomed to the formalities. Savings are mainly for education and marriage of children, repairing houses and so on. Though eighty eight percent save seventy six percent point out they have debts. The debts are mainly incurred from local money lenders .Only nine percent have bank loans and twenty percent have gold loans. Debts were mainly incurred for marriage of children, education of children, repair of houses and treatment of kith and kin. The respondents do believe that they have a positive role in decision making in the families. They take decision on children's education, purchase of durable goods and to a certain extent marriage of their children. Often the women turn out to be the sole earners and decision makers in the family with the irresponsible attitude of the husbands. These female work force are happy that they are capable of managing the family efficiently. The employment has made the life secure for around eighty three percent of the respondents.

The womenfolk have strong social relations. They actively participate in family ceremonies and socio cultural activities in their neighborhood. Their main mode of entertainment is watching television. They do take the pleasure of going for films and for local festivals 62 point out that they have the support of the husband and relatives in their activities. Seventy three percent of the respondents do have their own house though all the houses are not pucca ninety one percent of the houses are equipped with electricity, toilets and water nine percent do not have availability of water at a close distance.

Despite the fact that these women labourers are strong earning members of the family, only three percent have property in their name. All but one respondent has a mobile phone. Eighty six percent of the families have Television sets, Sixty eight percent have radio, twelve percent have refrigerators and seventy eight percent have mixers in

their houses. These durable goods are mainly acquired through instalment schemes. The labourers acquire utensils; spend money for shopping when they get bonus or extra payment especially on festive occasions.

Every respondent had their reason to continue working in this sector, sixty eight percent points out that they are willing to work as long as health permits them. Eighteen percent prefers to work till debts are cleared. Fourteen percent point out that they will work till they complete their responsibilities.

Suggestions

1. Female workers should be given training in different skills so that they can be trained workers in the construction field.
2. The work force should be informed of the schemes available from the government and a society or a union of labourers should be formed for the same especially for workers in small construction sites.
3. The males in the family should share the burden of the women in the activities at home.

Conclusion

It is noted that the women construction workers in Kerala are better placed than their counterparts in other states. The study reveals that the construction sector has provided opportunities for unskilled women labour force. Though they find the work strenuous they are glad to get a job with their limited qualification and skills. The women folk are empowered to a great extent and are playing an important role in the family affairs. Around half of the workforce do have the support of the family in the endeavours. But the other side of the study is that these women do not prefer to acquire skills and to become skilled labour force in construction sector. They have begun their job as coolies or helpers and ending up with that.

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