



GENDER DISPARITY AMONG FLOCKING CONSTRUCTION WORKERS TO CHANDIGARH: A REALITY CHECK

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Abstract

Construction in Chandigarh has been taking place at a very rapid pace in recent years. The objective of this paper is to examine and highlight factors for the influx of migrants from the different states of the country which has been taking place in the city in different age groups. Gender disparity among construction workers will be emphasized by analysing the plausible reasons for migration. The migrants do not come alone but bring spouses and invite their relations from the same village to earn when there is work and there is demand for labour. The vertical mobility among the construction workers is gender specific. The research paper would try and focus on gender specific issues in the construction arena, with Chandigarh as the region under study.



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The construction industry is one of the world's major industries. Its achievement in rebuilding areas devastated by both natural and man-made disasters, and in providing power, services and communications to meet the rising needs and expectations of people throughout the world, has conferred great benefits on the human race. Despite mechanization, construction remains a major employer of labour – it often employs between 9 and 12 per cent of a country's working population, and sometimes as much as 20 per cent¹. Construction provides work to people with many different talents and educational backgrounds including–

¹ Sheela Patel (1990). Street children, hotel boys and children of pavement dwellers and construction workers in Bombay- how they meet their daily needs. *Journal of Environment and Urbanization*. 2 (2).

managers, clerical staff, accountants, engineers, truck drivers and construction workers.² The Construction workers can be classified as structural, finishing or mechanical workers.

The adoption of the strategy of liberalization, privatization and globalization, by the government has further increased the pace of construction work. In the last few decades it has registered a high growth rate in generation of jobs.

The creation of Chandigarh as the Capital of Punjab and Haryana is a landmark in the development of post-Independence India. It is the only artificial city built from scratch, out of a howling wilderness, which is a monumental achievement of the talented architects.³ All efforts were made to plan Chandigarh as a modern town with all amenities. The plans depicting the growth of the city since its inception in the first four decades are an indicator that the first phase had 29 self-supporting units known as sectors covering an area of 9,000 acres and catering to the needs of 1,50,000 people. The second phase with a much higher density had 17 Sectors (sector 31 to 47) spread over an area of 6,000 acres to accommodate 3,050,000 people.⁴ In the Urban Complex plan approximately 8 sq. kms. area comprising of Sector 48 to 56 and part of Sector 61 and 63 have been earmarked for developing the third phase Sectors⁵ where construction is taking place. Chandigarh, as a city, is still young and evolving, thereby its consistent expansion has made construction work an important activity even today. A lot of construction work is being carried out in individual houses and private societies by construction workers being hired by contractors and sub-contractors. Recarpeting roads, removal of roundabouts for traffic lights, renovation of the major Infrastructures like bus terminus, railway station, airport etc., and building of new houses in the residential areas is being done.

The increasing growth of population and growth of the city in phases, major initiatives undertaken to upgrade infrastructure – to boost eco growth in the region & emerge as a regional hub in the areas of service industry, education, health, e-services required construction of buildings is a common site in the city. Construction work is the most preferred avenue of employment since its inception and growth in phases for unskilled,

² ACE Mentor Best Practices Manual Carrier Exploration (2004) **Skilled Construction Trades-ACE Mentor Program.** www.acementor.org/index.php/download/file/view/282/38 retrieved on 3rd march 2010

³ Malik, M.L. (1968). Guide to Chandigarh. Navjeevan News Agency, Chandigarh

⁴ Malik, M.L. (1968). Guide to Chandigarh. Navjeevan News Agency, Chandigarh

⁵ Statistical Abstract (2011) Statistical Abstract of Chandigarh, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Chandigarh Administration, Chandigarh

illiterate, semi-skilled and skilled population coming mainly from rural areas looking for work in the city.

This paper is restricted to construction workers in Chandigarh only. This has been chosen because there are large numbers of migrant construction workers in the city. It is important to mention here that Chandigarh, Union Territory and capital of two states - Punjab and Haryana is the only planned city where planned construction work was done in a phased manner from 1951 without any planning for the workers who constructed it brick by brick. This is a humble effort to study the migration of the construction workers involved in the construction of civil works in the city, since it is only in this stage we have both the males and females employed in construction.

A total sample of two hundred and five respondents was selected. The respondents were selected after visiting various construction sites of Chandigarh. The sites were randomly selected where construction was in the Third Phase and also from the northern sectors where construction of large public buildings is being done under the expansion plan of the administration. The construction workers who are migrants and have been working as construction workers in the city have been divided into:

- Workers hired independently from road crossings / labour chowks by the owners / sub-contractor directly;
- workers hired by government agencies, municipal corporations, engineering department for doing all kinds of construction work;
- Workers hired along with their husbands through labour agents or sub-contractors for a particular project;
- Workers hired through labour agents and moved from one project to another with the contractor. They are part of his permanent labour force;
- Workers who assist their husbands but are not paid any wages directly by the contractor; the husband receives the wages for work.

The construction workers migrating to Chandigarh are of different age groups; among the male workers it ranges between 17-68 years, it is between 22 to 46 years among the females who are married and have migrated with their husband. In the teens girls/females migrating with their families are not largely involved in construction activities and remain in the jhuggi looking after the younger siblings and cooking food for the family. In the post development

period in Chandigarh the work participation of female has increased especially among '*independent women*' in response to the employment opportunities in construction work. Females either migrate in groups or with children & among them are mainly widows or those who have separated from husbands. More males join construction work at much younger age either because they have to support the family, or have run away from home. Those who came to Chandigarh in the early years and have continued to stay in this work over the years have now moved up vertically and are Sub Thekedars or Thekedars. The income of the family engaged in construction work varies between 3000/- to 25000/- depending on number of family members engaged in construction work but the earnings of female construction workers is crucial for family survival.

Though there has been an increase of demand for female workers also in the construction in the city but the Mason, welder, shuttering, beldar, site inspector foreman, Munshi, carpenter & other skilled jobs are male dominated. Unlike other industries, where females are increasingly employed in semiskilled and skilled occupations, in construction industry, as in other areas females are only employed in unskilled work. Female construction workers only carry head loads of bricks cement sand, stone and water to the masons & sift sand.

Females are engaged almost exclusively as casual manual labourers in the construction work. Yet the rate of increase of demand for female construction workers has not kept pace with the rate of increase in use of technology and modern equipment, in construction sector. There are gender differences in the pattern of labour use but it can be seen that at times there is male-female substitution also in the labour working on the construction sites.

The male construction workers who have migrated here alone leaving their family behind in the place of permanent residence in search of jobs in large numbers are from:--

- Bihar (*Supaul, Buxar, Aara, Sita Mari, Saharsa and Purnia Districts*)
- U.P. (*Gonda, Lakhimpur, Gorukhpur, Sidharthnagar and Lucknow*)
- Assam (*kokrajhar*)
- Madhya Pradesh (*Tikamgarh*)
- Nepal (*Naul Prashi dist. adjoining Lakhimpur in Bihar*)

Females constitute about one fourth of the proportion of the total construction workers in Chandigarh. The Construction workers migrated with their families or spouses leaving their native villages in search of construction work in Chandigarh are from:--

- Chhattisgarh (*Bilaspur, Jahangir, Raigarh, Chaapak, Jahangir Chappa districts*)

- Madhya Pradesh (*Sagar, Chattarpur*)
- Uttar Pradesh (*Kanpur, Sidharth Nagar*)
- Rajasthan (*Tonk*)
- West Bengal (*Tata Nagar*)

The major reasons for construction workers coming and staying in Chandigarh are: the availability of work which has influenced maximum respondents to come and stay in Chandigarh and make it their second home. The female and the male construction workers have both mentioned this as the main reason. The spouse comes here and work and their partners come here later to join them, this is also a major reason for females but for very few male workers. The two factors: availability of work and the spouse coming here together motivates about 70% of the female respondents to take up work in Chandigarh. Other factors which contribute as a reason to migrate to the city are due to their parents who have taken up work here, others have migrated in the city because they have some close family member working here or they have lost their parents and have come with the brother's family, maternal or paternal uncle or aunt to earn and collect money for their marriage. Cleanliness and safety and security have also been cited as the reasons which have influenced their decision to be here. Regular and higher wages is another reason for them to be here. Some of the females mention other reasons which include availability of electricity, clean water, clean surroundings, and connectivity to their home town by rail for choosing Chandigarh as the city for working here.

In case of male construction workers while half of them mention availability of regular work as the main reason, some of them are in the city because their relative is here either as *Jamadar* who has brought them here or there relative is here who influenced the decision to come here. Facilities available in Chandigarh are also the reason for their migration to the city. Like female's, male construction workers also mention the higher wages as the reason; others are in the city due to one or the other extended family members who brought them here promising work in construction. Male workers have come to work here because they are influenced by their friends who speak high about this place and the availability of work. It is the availability of regular and plenty of work is the main reason, followed by the higher wages, infrastructure facilities, cleanliness and feeling of safety which are also the pull factors which bring migrants to work as construction workers here in the city.

The push factors which force the construction workers to work outside their hometown and migrate to Chandigarh include better and regular wages when there is no work on the fields. There is no alternative to earn to help them to provide facilities of education/ education of self/children, construction of house, earn regularly to payback loan, aspiration to have a better place to live with better amenities, to live with spouse after marriage etc. though in most cases more than one factor has been influential. Among the major reasons the opportunity to earn and save money for the construction of their own house, especially to make a pucca house also influences a large number of these construction workers to move out of their place of residence. Yet another very important factor which influences the decision to migrate to Chandigarh is to earn and save so as to provide good educational facilities to their children, continuation of their children's higher education. In some cases the workers themselves are also students pursuing graduation who come to work here only during vacations so that they are able to save money for paying hostel dues and other annual charges. Other factors include: to earn money to be able to eat good and healthy food, purchase agricultural land, marriage of self or children etc. They also come to the city to work so that they can pay back the loans. Female construction workers are also motivated by the availability of opportunity of better earnings, to save money for the construction of own house and also by the reason of the city being a better place to live in.

Construction workers migrate with their families or spouses from different regions and states leaving their native villages in search of work. These people generally remain nomadic throughout their life. Generally the husband is hired by the contractor and his wife and children move along with him. The woman in the family, generally the wife, takes up the work of construction at the same site along with her husband. They travel from one area of work to another along with their families and live in a place, which is either provided by the owner of the construction site / company or somewhere nearby, building temporary shelters. The migration from one place to another has more serious implications for females who are required to make more adjustments to the new environment.⁶

Both men and female construction workers working on the construction sites are exposed to the vagaries of the weather conditions because much of the construction work is done outside or in partially enclosed structures. The work of plastering, fixing of tiles and

⁶ Grover, N., Singh, K. N. "Cultural Geography Form and Process" (Ed). Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, pp 183-191.

marbles etc., even done inside the structure, requires skills, for which only the male workers are employed. This affects the work opportunities for women. Majority of males and females in the construction sector perceive that females lack skills to carry out certain tasks in the construction sector. This mind set has led to the discrimination of female workers in the sector and is preventing them from being trained and employed as skilled labour in the construction work.

The nature of activities of the construction workers are such that they work full time and some times over 48 hours a week. Neither their job, nor their work at a particular site is permanent or of a perennial nature. They have to work in the evenings, weekends and holidays to help finish a job or take care of emergencies.⁷ The construction workers have to move from one place to another in search of work. Does gender discrimination in terms and working conditions, affect female workers participation in construction work differently? How it affects the composition of the construction workers needs attention.

Construction workers are exploited by getting paid less than minimum wages. The issue of gender disparity in the payment of minimum or less than minimum wages even when they do the same type of work raises concerns.⁸ In the micro sense, females are being used as a *reserve army* within the construction workforce being drawn upon in situations of excess and retrenchment as demand slackens. The male power structure holds the mostly semi-literate and illiterate females employed in the construction sector slightly better than bonded labourers and discriminates them in work allocation and wages.⁹

Construction workers on the construction sites have to climb and carry heavy loads amidst a clutter of building materials.¹⁰ They at times have to climb great heights to pass the mixture to fellow workers. This has an effect on the health of the construction workers.¹¹ The study is required to highlight how these activities have an ill effect and the health problems which the female workers have to face.

⁷ Bureau of Labour Statistics retrieved from <http://bls.gov/oco/cg/cgs003.htm>

⁸Nandel, S. (2006) “**Female Workers in Unorganised Sector Study on Construction Industry in Haryana**” International Journal of Development Issues Vol.5, No.2. pp 119-132.

⁹ Suchitra, J.V and Rajasekar, D. (2006) **One Size Does Not Fit All: Employment Insecurity of Unorganised Workers in Karnataka**, The Indian Journal of Labour Economics, Vol.49.No.3.pp455-473.

¹⁰ Bureau of Labour Statistics retrieved from <http://bls.gov/oco/cg/cgs003.htm>

¹¹ Gaurav, R.B. Kartikeyen, S. Wayal, R. Joshi, S.D. “**Assessment of Health Profile of Daily Wage Labourers**” Indian Journal of Occupational and Environment Medicine, Vol.9.No.pp115-117.(In their study point out that more than 60% workers had musculo-skeletal problems affecting various joints and muscles ranging from neck to foot)

Some work places such as residential construction sites are static in nature, while others such as laying of pipelines, construction of roadways, canals, railways and water channels move as the work progresses. In such cases the construction site conditions are even more temporary. Sometimes the nature of construction work results in working at different sites, which are not only far away from worker's homes but also from their community lines. This creates problems for female construction workers in general and pregnant female construction workers in particular, as they have specific needs because of their reproductive and biological structure which require special facilities. Attention needs to be given to these gender specific needs when females are being hired for these kinds of construction works.

In most cases, safety norms are violated in building construction activity. Surveys on construction workers reveal the scepticism of workers about the effectiveness of the first aid assistance provided at sites. What is worse, the contractors remove sick and injured workers from sites and pay rolls without giving them adequate compensation¹². The construction workers who are most in need receive no health care, no holiday pay and no protection against loss of pay when they are unable to work due to unemployment, maternity period, ill health, accidents or old age. The construction workers expect gender equality in the benefits that are provided to the workers by the contractors.

Very little attention has been given to the plight of construction workers, especially the female construction workers, even by trade unions. Construction workers do not join unions, as they cannot leave their worksite by giving away their daily wages to go elsewhere to pursue their redressal. Their plight, therefore, is one of near helplessness in the face of injustice and exploitation.¹³ Unionization is not allowed or encouraged. The construction workers, especially female construction workers, remain invisible, vulnerable and voiceless. It is important to understand how both male and female construction workers get exploited, differently in the absence of any union.

The residential sheds provided to the construction workers are purely temporary in nature. These are made of flimsy material and lack basic minimum facilities such as separate cooking space, drinking water, lavatories, bathing and washing places. The absence of basic amenities affect female workers and male workers differently as they have different needs.

¹² **Report of the National Commission on Labour**, (2002). Ministry of Labour, Government of India, New Delhi.

¹³ "The Construction Industry in the Twenty First Century: Its Image, Employment prospects and skill requirements" ILO. Geneva.

Once the construction work is over on a site the contractor has nothing to do with the construction workers, and they have to vacate these places.

Frequent changes in the work and instability deprive the construction workers and their children of primary facilities like housing, health, water, sanitation, education and even below poverty ration cards. Crèche facilities are also not available at worksites. There is a need to study how the absence of these amenities impacts gender discrimination in the socio economic pattern of labour available for employment in construction.

Children of these construction workers, living in construction sites, suffer from malnutrition, under nourishment and communicable diseases. In the absence of clean drinking water and proper sanitary conditions, cholera and other diseases spread quickly, many of them suffer from respiratory diseases. These affect the mother and father differently even when both are working in the same construction site.

Social security benefits do not exist because of various constraints such as lack of stable relationship between employer and employees, instability of employment, poor and uncertain earnings of workers, unreliable duration of work. The problem gets highlighted more in the case of female construction workers. It affects the female construction workers in her role of a worker, housewife and mother.

There are gender differences in the pattern of labour use in construction in the city. At times there is male female substitution in the labour working in the construction work. Unlike other industries, where females are increasingly employed in semiskilled and skilled occupations, in construction industry, females are only employed in unskilled work. Females are engaged almost exclusively as casual manual labourers in the Construction work. It can be said, as in all other spheres and occupations gender disparities among construction workers also exist in the construction industry.