Chapter Seven: Conditions of women construction workers in Kolkata

Introduction:

The women construction workers face great gender inequalities in the construction industry. Generally in India women construction workers are found in the unorganised sector. Women constitute over 25% of the construction workforce in India. Out of a total of 1.46 million construction workers about 36 lakhs are women. Most of the women workers are in manual unskilled jobs in this industry. Most of them are young, single women, poorly educated, paid meagre salaries, and unless skilled working 9 to 10 hours/day; women are recruited under disadvantaged conditions and their major problems are lack of skills and training.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kolkata</th>
<th>Total Male</th>
<th>Total Female</th>
<th>% of construction workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>49029</td>
<td>47653</td>
<td>1376 97 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49029</td>
<td>47653</td>
<td>1376 97 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India 1991, Series-26, West Bengal, Part III, B Series, Economic Tables, Volume: 1. Industrial categories, Main workers other than cultivators and agricultural labourers, Construction workers, industrial categories, able: VI. The district is entirely urban, as such data for rural areas has not been shown, p. 127.

At Kolkata, there are 49029 construction workers; among them male population is 4753 and female population is only 1376. In short, the percentage of women construction workers in Kolkata is only 3% of the total construction workers. In this study only 5% women workers are found in the unorganised sector.

Conditions of women workers in Kolkata:

Women construction workers are found usually between the age groups of 25-45 years, and they all are Hindus and their mother tongue is Bengali, coming mainly from North 24 Parganas(80%), South 24 Praganas(10%) and Kolkata(10%). They are all local workers, illiterates, poor, married and their monthly income is less than Rs.2000. They mostly belong to the Scheduled Castes (70%). Most of them are single parents, separated from their husbands stay at their natal homes and earning for their children as well as their aged parents. They all work as helpers of their male co-workers. Among women workers, 40% stay at their own kutcha houses and the rest (60%) are in rented accommodation. They are economically very poor. For recreation they have only radio. Only 10% women workers have televisions set at their houses.
They are daily wage earners, locals as well as casual workers. Women construction workers are denied equal remunerations and are not even paid the minimum wages. Women have to work 10-12 hours in a day. There is no specific rest interval for them. There is no such provision of paid holidays for casual workers even if they work continuously for a considerable period of time. Women workers do not get paid leaves.

Women workers are all recruited by the male co-workers. They all find that this is a stressful work due to over work as helpers and sexual torture by male co-workers at the same time. Almost all women reported gender-specific work stress factors, such as sex discrimination, and balancing work and family demands, above and beyond the impact of general job stressors such as job overload and skill underutilisation. They can not get any facilities like free health care facilities, ration at subsided rates, living quarters, canteens, and free schools for their children.

Most of them (50%) spend between 20% and 50% of their total income on food. Women workers generally spend 10% -15% of their total income as rent. All women workers monthly income is almost Rs.1600 and their total monthly expenditure is between 500 and 1000. They have negligible savings. They usually consume tea, biscuits, rice, curry and dal. Most of them(70%) suffer from anaemia, low blood pressure, cough, breathing problem, eye problem, breast pain etc. Some of them (10%) use homeopathy and some of them (20%) use allopathy medicines. Only 40% construction workers can afford to have pan to curb hunger. They have to work outside as well as at home. When they are at home they are busy in household work. Their only recreation is sleep. Their age at marriage is between 13 to 17 years and their size of family is between 1 and 3. They have immunised their children. Only 20% workers are aware of family planning programmes. They all have ration cards, voter's cards etc.

Many of them are forced to engage in sex with the labour contractors. As it is a buyer’s market the labourers compete among themselves to sell their labour at the lowest price besides offering free sex services. Young women construction workers are more on demand than aged women construction workers. Many of them use permanent contraceptives and few of them are addicted to substances.

The Indian construction industry has inherent gender biases owing to the perceived nature of work and mainstream notion of it being a male-dominated industry. Women construction workers are trapped in a cycle of late entry, being unskilled, receiving low wages

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and, therefore, being casual workers.\textsuperscript{248} Doing all the heavy work it is institutionalised that they received less salary than their male coworkers. Most of their work involves lifting a heavy load and carrying it in pans on their heads up ladders or scaffoldings. This work is more arduous, than some of the tasks men do. And yet, women are discriminated against in the payment of wages. Most of them joined construction sector by chance and not by choice, due to poverty or circumstantial poverty created by desertion, divorce etc.

One major problem faced by all women is non-availability of toilets in the sites. Another big problem is that the women always have to leave their toddlers at home or bring them along to the workplace. They are denied crèches at workplace or even maternity leave and benefits. Since the majority of women construction workers are either contract or casual labour, the problem of ensuring minimum protection and security for them have proved to be an extremely difficult task.

The Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act 1970 seeks to make the principal employer responsible for the provision of essential amenities and payment of wages. The contractor has to obtain a permit and deposit a security with the authorities to pay wages at the same rate as those paid by the principal employer, in default of which, the principal employer is authorised to make payments and recover the cost from the contractor. Drinking water, rest rooms, canteens and first-aid are some of the basic amenities which are to be provided by the contractor under the provisions of this Act. Under the rules of the Central Public Works Department contractors are bound to provide for wages and welfare services like crèches, housing of specific standards and sanitary services, prescribed working hours, weekly day of rest, overtime rates, wage periods and rates of payment. The Inspecting Officer is responsible for the enforcement of these rules and also to investigate cases of complaints or disputes under the Industrial Disputes & Workmen's Compensation Act.

The present legal provisions applicable to workers in this industry make it clear that apart from the provision of crèches and sanitation arrangements, the labour laws regarding maternity protection, prevention of night work and restraint on hazardous occupations including lifting of heavy loads that aim to protect women workers, are not in operation in this industry.\textsuperscript{249} In this respect it can be said that "make women workers safe at work sites, save nation from disastrous social consequences".\textsuperscript{250}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{249} Mazumdar, V, "Women Construction Workers: Report of two Surveys"; ICSSR, New Delhi, 1975, p.3.
\bibitem{250} National convention of working women in construction industry in India, 25-26\textsuperscript{th} August, 2007, Ranchi, Jharkhand, organized by Construction Workers federation of India, p. 9.
\end{thebibliography}
**Basic Rights of Women Workers:**

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) formulated the following seven basic rights of women:

a) The Right to Equal Pay, ILO Convention No. 100, Equal Remuneration, 1951. (in India)

b) The Right to Equal Treatment, ILO Convention No. 111, Discrimination (Employment and Occupation), 1958 (in India)


In the Indian constitution, Article 23 and 24 (i.e. right against exploitation), which are under the heading 'Fundamental Right' and Article 39 clauses (e) and (u) and Article 45, which are under the heading 'Directive Principles' of State Policy are covering the rights of women. (Chakrabarti: 2005: 140)

**Conclusion:**

To eradicate the inhuman exploitation of women construction workers the following recommendation are being made:

i. To Implement Labour Laws vigorously so that women workers and employees get proper facilities for child care, rest rooms and other legal benefits.

ii. To provide vocational training to the women workers in non-traditional jobs.

iii. To ensure that once a woman has received additional training—she is paid accordingly.

iv. To conduct literacy and adult education programmes for the women workers.

v. To create a safe and healthy work environment free from sexual harassment and workplace exploitation.

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251. Chakrabarti, D., India Construction Industry and Workers: Problems and Future, CWFI, Kolkata, 2005, pp. 139-140.

252. Chakrabarti, D., India Construction Industry and Workers: Problems and Future, CWFI, Kolkata, 2005, pp. 139-140.

Photo 7.1: Women construction workers in the labour market at Ultadanga