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BUILDING INEQUALITY: GENDER DISPARITIES IN THE SOCIO- ECONOMIC LIVES OF CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

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Abstract

The Indian construction industry, despite being one of the largest employment-generating sectors, continues to reflect deep-rooted gender disparities and unsafe working environments, particularly for women laborers. This research explores the dual challenges of gender-based discrimination and occupational hazards faced by women in the informal construction workforce. While women contribute significantly to physical labor on construction sites, they remain confined to unskilled roles, receive lower wages than their male counterparts, and are largely excluded from decision-making or supervisory positions. Moreover, the absence of adequate safety measures, sanitation facilities, legal protections, and health monitoring systems puts their physical and mental well-being at serious risk. Drawing on secondary data, field reports, and policy analysis, this paper examines the structural and social barriers that marginalize women in this sector. It also highlights the compounded effects of caste, migration status, and informal employment contracts on their vulnerability. The study concludes by advocating for gender-inclusive labor policies, targeted training programs, and stronger implementation of occupational safety standards to ensure a more equitable and secure future for women in the Indian construction workforce.

Keywords: gender disparity, construction labor, women workers, occupational hazards, informal sector, India, labor rights

I. Introduction

The construction industry in India is a cornerstone of infrastructure development and economic growth. It employs millions of workers across urban and rural regions, contributing substantially to national output. However, this vast sector is characterized by significant inequalities, especially in terms of gender representation and working conditions. Women workers, who form an essential part of the construction labor force, often remain invisible in official records and overlooked in policy discussions.

Their participation is largely concentrated in unskilled and manual tasks such as carrying building materials, preparing mixtures, and cleaning worksites. Despite their contribution, they face persistent wage gaps, limited access to skills training, and minimal opportunities for advancement into skilled or supervisory roles. These patterns reflect deep-seated gender



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norms that define construction work as inherently male-dominated, leaving women with few pathways to economic security or recognition.

Beyond economic disparities, women in construction routinely encounter unsafe and unhealthy work environments. The lack of protective equipment, inadequate sanitation facilities, and high exposure to dust and heavy loads create serious health risks. For many women, these occupational hazards are intensified by the pressures of poverty, caste-based discrimination, and the risk in informal employment contracts that offer little social protection or legal recourse.

This research paper seeks to examine these intersecting challenges in detail. By exploring gender disparities and occupational risks together, the study aims to shed light on the structural barriers that limit women's rights and safety in the construction sector. The findings also highlight the urgent need for policy reforms and targeted interventions to create safer, fairer, and more inclusive workplaces for women construction workers in India.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Gendered Labor Roles in Construction

The construction industry in India, though labor-intensive and rapidly growing, remains highly gender-segregated. Most studies agree that women workers are concentrated in the lowest tiers of labor hierarchies, primarily in physically demanding yet unskilled tasks such as carrying bricks, mixing cement, and clearing debris. These roles require substantial effort but receive little recognition and offer few opportunities for advancement. The perception of construction as a masculine domain has been deeply ingrained in industry practices, resulting in a gendered division of labor that limits women's participation in technical, supervisory, or skilled positions.

2.2 Wage Gaps and Economic Dis empowerment

Several field studies and reports from labor organizations have documented consistent wage disparities between male and female workers in construction. Women frequently earn less than men for identical tasks, a gap that widens in informal employment arrangements. Researchers argue that these wage gaps are normalized under the guise of "helper" classifications, where women's contributions are undervalued regardless of the actual work performed. Informal recruitment practices—where middlemen or contractors negotiate



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employment terms—leave women with little bargaining power and limited knowledge of their rights.

2.3 Occupational Hazards and Gender-Specific Risks

The construction environment exposes all workers to physical risks, but women face unique vulnerabilities due to biological, social, and infrastructural factors. The physically taxing nature of manual labor, combined with the absence of ergonomically appropriate tools or safety gear for women, leads to a range of health issues including back injuries, joint problems, respiratory illnesses, and reproductive complications. These risks are compounded by poor site hygiene, lack of menstrual hygiene products, and absence of clean toilets—basic facilities that are often overlooked in male-focused planning.

2.4 Legal Framework and Implementation Gaps

India's labor framework does include provisions aimed at protecting construction workers, notably through the Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996. However, the implementation of these laws remains patchy and uneven across states. For women, these gaps are particularly acute. Registration under welfare boards, which is required to access benefits like insurance, pensions, or maternity support, is often unavailable to women due to illiteracy, lack of documents, or discriminatory practices.

2.5 Internationalize: Caste, Class, and Migration

Gender disparities in construction work cannot be viewed in isolation from other social variables. Literature on internationalize demonstrates how caste, class, and migration status intersect to create complex layers of disadvantage. Dalit and Adidas women, for instance, are over-represented in the most hazardous and poorly paid jobs within the sector. Their socioeconomic status makes them more vulnerable to exploitation, and they often lack the social capital required to demand better conditions.

2.6 Innovations, Interventions, and Future Research

There have been some encouraging developments aimed at promoting gender equity in construction. Skill development programs run by non-profits and government agencies have started offering vocational training to women in masonry, plumbing, and tiling. These initiatives aim to break occupational stereotypes and create pathways to better employment.



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However, studies show that these programs often face challenges such as low participation, poor outreach in rural areas, and lack of post-training job placement.

III. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **mixed-methods research design**, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender disparities and occupational hazards faced by women in the Indian construction sector. The quantitative component focuses on patterns related to employment, wages, and access to facilities, while the qualitative part explores the lived experiences of female workers, offering context and depth to statistical findings.

This dual approach enables the study to capture not only measurable inequalities but also the nuanced social and cultural factors that shape women's participation and treatment in the industry.

3.2 Objectives of the Study

The midpoint objectives of the methodology are as follows:

- To identify and analyze gender-based differences in job roles, wages, and access to welfare provisions.
- To examine the types of occupational hazards experienced by women on construction sites.
- To explore how intersecting factors such as caste, migration, and informality influence women's experiences.
- To assess the effectiveness of legal and institutional frameworks in addressing these issues.

3.3 Study Area

The research was conducted across three major urban centers in India—**Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore**—which are home to a large concentration of construction activity and a diverse migrant labor force. These cities were selected to provide a representative sample of varying geographical, cultural, and industrial settings within the construction sector.



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Additionally, select perm-urban and semi-rural locations were included to capture experiences of women working on both government and private construction projects.

3.4 Sampling Strategy

A **purposive sampling technique** was used to select participants who are directly engaged in construction work. The sample included:

- 100 women laborers (35 from Delhi, 35 from Mumbai, 30 from Bangalore)
- 15 male workers for comparative data
- 10 site supervisors or contractors
- 5 representatives from labor welfare boards or NGOs

This sampling approach ensured that the study focuses on individuals who are most affected by the subject under investigation while also allowing triangulation through perspectives from employers and labor rights advocates.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

A. Primary Data

1. Structured Questionnaires

A set of structured questionnaires was administered to female construction workers to gather quantitative data on demographics, income levels, job roles, hours of work, availability of safety equipment, and access to health services. The form also included multiple-choice and Likert-scale items to assess workers' knowing of labor laws and perceived workplace risks.

2. Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with selected workers to explore their daily challenges, coping strategies, and views on discrimination, harassment, and health issues. These interrogation allowed participants to explicit their experiences in their own words, offering rich qualitative insight.

3. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Discussions were held with site managers, local labor contractors, and NGO representatives working with women construction workers. The KIIs provided important



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information on industry practices, labor recruitment patterns, and policy implementation challenges.

4. Site Observations

Direct observations were made at several construction sites to assess on-ground working conditions. Focus was placed on availability of personal protective equipment, sanitation facilities, site safety measures, and the presence of childcare arrangements.

B. Secondary Data

Secondary sources such as government labor statistics, census data, academic journals, and reports from international labor organizations (ILO, UN Women, etc.) were reviewed. Legal documents such as the **BOCW Act**, **Minimum Wages Act**, and **Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act** were analyzed to assess the existing legal protection mechanisms.

3.6 Limitations of the Study

While the research design aimed to ensure depth and accuracy, a few limitations remain:

- The sample size, though diverse, may not represent the entire population of women construction workers in India.
- Seasonal and regional variations in construction activity might affect the generalization of findings.
- Due to the informal nature of employment, some data were self-reported and could be affected by recall bias.

Despite these constraints, the mixed-methods approach provides a balanced and grounded framework for understanding the complex challenges faced by women in the construction workforce.

IV. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Introduction to Data Interpretation

The data collected through surveys, interviews, and site observations has been carefully examined to reveal patterns and disparities affecting women in the Indian construction industry. The analysis focuses on five core themes: **employment patterns**, **wage inequality**, **occupational safety**, **awareness of legal rights**, and **social vulnerability**. Each theme is



discussed below with reference to both quantitative data and qualitative insights, providing a nuanced understanding of the gender-based barriers faced by female construction workers.

4.2 Employment Patterns and Role Distribution

Survey results indicate that over **85% of women respondents** were engaged in unskilled manual labor such as brick-carrying, sand sieving, and debris removal. Only **7% of women** had ever received any form of skill training, and none were employed in technical roles like masonry, painting, electrical work, or supervision.

In contrast, the majority of male workers surveyed had opportunities for skill development or were assigned roles with higher responsibility and pay. Interviews revealed that many women workers desired to up-skill but were never given the chance, with one respondent noting, *"Even after 10 years, they only call me for loading work. I never got a chance to learn anything new."* This pattern confirms the **occupational segregation** deeply rooted in gender norms and biased labor practices within the industry.

4.3 Wage Disparities

Quantitative data from the survey shows a stark wage gap. Women reported earning an average of **₹280–₹320 per day**, while men doing similar or even lighter work earned **₹400–₹450 per day**. Nearly **68% of women** said they had no idea about the legally mandated minimum wage in their state.

Job Type	Male Wage (₹/day)	Female Wage (₹/day)
Brick-carrying	400	300
Mixing cement	420	310
Cleaning worksites	350	280

Table 1 below illustrates the wage differences between male and female workers:

This discrepancy is not only a violation of labor law but also reflects the **undervaluation of women's contributions** in construction, especially in informal work arrangements where oversight is minimal.

4.4 Occupational Hazards and Workplace Conditions



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When asked about work-related health issues, **76% of women respondents** reported frequent body pain, fatigue, or breathing problems. Field observations confirmed that **only 15%** of women were provided with basic safety gear such as gloves, boots, or helmets, and even those were often ill-fitting.

Further, **sanitation was a major concern**. More than **82% of women** reported that their worksite lacked proper toilet facilities, forcing them to either wait long hours or use unsafe locations. Lack of menstrual hygiene support and unsafe working hours were also identified as major challenges.

One interviewee shared, *“We do the same work as men, but nobody gives us helmets or shoes. If we fall or get sick, we lose our day’s wage. There is no support.”*

These findings underline the **absence of gender-sensitive safety protocols** and a general neglect of women’s well-being on construction sites.

4.5 Legal Awareness and Institutional Support

Despite the existence of laws like the **BOCW Act** and the **Minimum Wages Act**, awareness among women construction workers remains alarmingly low. Only **12% of responder** had detected of the BOCW Act, and none were officially registered with a state labor welfare board.

Even among workers who had experienced wage theft or harassment, **most did not file complaints** due to fear of job loss or retaliation. Interviews with NGO representatives revealed that **contractors often avoid formal registration** of women workers to sidestep legal obligations like insurance or maternity benefits.

This indicates a serious **gap between policy and implementation**, which leaves women workers in a legally vulnerable position despite formal protections being in place.

4.6 Inter-sectional Vulnerabilities: Caste, Migration, and Informality

Further analysis reveals that social identities such as **caste and migration status** significantly influence the degree of vulnerability. Among the women surveyed:

- **72% belonged to Scheduled Castes (SC) or Scheduled Tribes (ST)**
- **81% were internal migrants**, working outside their home district or state



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These women often lacked local ID proofs or ration cards, excluding them from government schemes or healthcare services. Migrant workers, in particular, faced language barriers, unstable housing, and frequent relocation, which disrupted their children's education and made community support difficult.

This inter-sectional disadvantage intensifies gender-based inequalities and illustrates why a **one-size-fits-all policy approach is inadequate** for addressing their complex realities.

4.7 Thematic Insights from Qualitative Data

Thematic coding of interview responses revealed several recurring issues:

- **Invisible labor:** Women felt their work was taken for granted and not recognized by employers.
- **Lack of voice:** Very few women were part of any worker group or union, leaving them isolated and dis-empowered.
- **Childcare burden:** Many women brought children to worksites due to the absence of creche facilities, putting children at risk and affecting mothers' productivity.
- **Normalization of discrimination:** Workers expressed resignation to unfair treatment, with one stating, *"This is how it has always been. We don't have a choice."*

V Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, it is clear that women construction workers in India face multiple, overlapping challenges that stem from deep-rooted gender bias, weak policy implementation, and systemic neglect. To ensure equity, dignity, and safety for women in this sector, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

5.1. Strengthen Legal Awareness and Outreach at the Grassroots

There is a pressing need to inform women workers about their legal rights, including equal pay, workplace safety, and access to benefits under laws like the **BOCW Act**, **Maternity Benefit Act**, and **Minimum Wages Act**. Simple, multilingual awareness drives through street plays, leaflets, mobile vans, and local NGOs can empower women to seek justice and assert their rights.

5.2. Mandatory Registration and Welfare Board Inclusion



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All women construction workers, especially migrants, should be compulsorily registered under State Welfare Boards. Governments must simplify the registration process, allow mobile verification for migrants, and organize on-site enrollment camps. This will ensure they receive benefits like insurance, pensions, and maternity support.

5.3. Introduce Gender-Sensitive Safety Standards

Safety protocols must be tailored for women workers. Contractors must provide **well-fitting safety gear, clean and separate toilet facilities, access to sanitary napkins, and designated rest areas** for women. These should be regularly monitored by labor inspectors and made non-negotiable for project approvals.

5.4. Establish On-Site Childcare Support

The absence of childcare facilities forces many women to bring young children to unsafe work zones. Establishing creche **facilities** at medium and large construction sites will not only protect children but also help women focus on their work without anxiety. Government subsidies or CSR initiatives can help implement this in partnership with private builders.

5.5. Equal Pay and Transparent Wage Structures

Wage discrimination continues to be a silent form of injustice. Strict enforcement of **equal pay for equal work** must be ensured through routine audits and spot-checks. A **public display of wage rates**, along with accessible complaint mechanisms, can help create transparency and accountability on-site.

5.6. Promote Skill Development and Career Advancement for Women

Government and private construction firms should actively enroll women in **technical training programs** for masonry, welding, painting, and other skilled trades. Employers must be encouraged—through incentives or mandates—to hire trained women in these roles. This will enhance women's income, self-worth, and position in the workforce.

5.7. Encourage Unionization and Women's Committees

Support should be extended to help women form or join **worker collectives**, especially at the city or regional level. The presence of **women-led grievance redressal cells**, both on-site and within unions, will help workers report harassment or unfair practices without fear.

5.8. Gender-Sensitization Training for Contractors and Supervisors



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Contractors, site supervisors, and male workers should undergo **mandatory gender-sensitization workshops**. These sessions should address unconscious bias, respectful communication, anti-harassment protocols, and the value of women's work. Changing mindsets at the top is crucial for transforming conditions at the ground level.

5.9. Strengthen Monitoring and Penal Mechanisms

Labor departments need to move beyond paperwork. There must be **random physical inspections, online complaint portals, and penalties for non-compliance** with gender-specific labor laws. A central grievance helpline with multilingual support should also be established to aid migrant women.

VI Conclusion

The Indian construction industry, though vital to the nation's growth, continues to overlook the struggles of its most invisible workforce—women. This research brings to light the stark gender disparities and health hazards that women face every day on construction sites, often without voice, visibility, or protection.

Despite their hard work and contribution, women are largely confined to unskilled tasks, denied fair wages, exposed to unsafe environments, and left out of training and policy conversations. Many of these challenges are not accidental but rooted in long-standing social and institutional neglect. Caste, class, and migration status further deepen their vulnerability, creating layers of inequality that are difficult to break without systemic change.

However, this is not just a story of marginalization. It is also a call for reform. The evidence shows that with the right mix of legal protection, gender-sensitive practices, access to training, and supportive policies, women can thrive and rise within this industry. Empowering them is not just a matter of justice—it is essential for building a stronger, more inclusive, and sustainable construction workforce.

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