

Plights of Women Construction Workers in Bangladesh

Md. Ashraful Alam

Associate Professor, Institute of Social Welfare and Research, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract: The construction industry plays an important role in the economic development of a country like Bangladesh. In recent years, the sector has experienced considerable growth, resulting in the creation of numerous jobs. Currently, men and women are working in this sector, which is a very favorable aspect. However, construction workers in Bangladesh, particularly women workers, are exposed to hazardous conditions on many construction sites and face a variety of challenges, including low wages or wage discrimination, a lack of safety, and abuse. Keeping this in mind, the study was conducted to look into the plight of women construction workers highlighting the issues they encountered at work. Following the qualitative study method data were collected from 10 women workers through in-depth case interviews. The study found that most of the women working in the construction sector are untrained and employed as helpers. They are not given any appointment letters, everything is determined verbally. They are facing discrimination and injustice in various ways such as long working hours, lower wages than the male workers, lack of safety measures, medical care facilities, etc. In addition, male coworkers and superiors have also exposed them to various sorts of mental and even sexual harassment. It is expected that the findings of this study would help in understanding at least some of the major issues regarding their plight, as well as establishing and protecting the human rights of women construction workers.

Keywords: Construction Industry, Occupational safety, Wages, Women workers, Abuse

I. INTRODUCTION

The construction industry is one of the biggest and fast-growing industries in the world (Jamal, 2015). It is an integral part of infrastructure and economic development of a country (Barnabas et al., 2009). The sector is advancing rapidly with the continuation of modernization and industrialization. Smaller towns and cities are becoming more urbanized, which has boosted the construction industry. Globally it is estimated that construction labor forms 7.5 percent of the total labor force (Shah & Tiwari, 2010). It establishes backward and forward links with different economic sectors (Ahmed et al., 2018). Bangladesh is a developing country in South Asia where the construction industry has been rapidly expanding in recent years though it began to expand around 1990 (Ahmed, 2014). Now it is one of the largest and fastest expanding industrial sectors among numerous company growth sectors (Hossain & Ahmed, 2018). The urban area, next to transportation, is the biggest employment sector of Bangladesh (Biswas, 2014). However, the number of construction workers tends to increase in line with its expansion because it is still primarily reliant on

human labor (Sourav, 2019). According to the Bangladesh Construction Workers Union and the Real Estate & Housing Association of Bangladesh (REHAB), the construction industry employs approximately 3.5 million people (Rahman et al., 2020). Bangladesh has 4000 construction firms, according to the Bangladesh Association of Construction Industry (BACI), with 100 of them capable of completing projects in other countries (Ahmed, 2014).

More than 90% of construction workers are men all around the world. The proportion of women is higher in several developing countries (Sultana et al., 2015). In Bangladesh, the participation of women in employment is heavily influenced by social, cultural, and religious values. As a result, Bangladeshi women have a greater economic disadvantage in the workplace than men (J. B. Hossain & Kusakabe, 2005). Until recently, women's participation in formal sector jobs was minimal in Bangladesh (Abdullah, 2008). However, the hope is that the number of women workers in various informal sectors such as construction industry is steadily increasing. Despite the fact that the construction sector has a gender bias due to its physical strength requirements, women workers are appointed to do simple tasks considering them as unskilled, cheap, available, and flexible laborers. The majority of them come from low-socio-economic backgrounds which pushes them to engage in such rigorous work. They are normally paid on a daily basis and work under an oral contract with their employer. They are hired through middlemen or contractors, and they do not receive appointment letters or ID cards. The working environment is far from decent or dignified. Women workers encounter numerous challenges as a result of the hostile working environment. They are paid lower wages than prescribed by the contractor, and they are exploited at every level (Rajanna, 2015). A woman worker is required to work longer hours than a male worker, yet she is not compensated for this additional time.

However, the lives of women construction workers are filled with sadness and misery. Although they have worked in this industry to support their families, they have received no recognition. Furthermore, although she earns a living with hard work, society does not perceive her positively. Building edifice for others they have to live in dirty slum area with starvation or half meal or have to die because of not having health security. Their husband and baby die for lack of treatment. Lack of capacity forces them to engage their child in child labor (Chowdhury, 1986). The government enacted laws to protect workers in various fields, including the

construction sector. However, they cannot enjoy the benefits of labor law.

Even though women construction workers face a variety of issues, little is known about them due to a lack of research. Numerous studies have been conducted on working women in various industries, only the construction industry has received less attention. With this in mind, the current study was conducted to explore the overall situation of women working in the construction sector and to address their work-related problems with efforts needed from policymakers, government and non-government organizations, and others through the effective outcomes of the study.

II. MATREIALS AND METHOD

The study was mainly qualitative where the case study method was applied to explore the plight of the women construction workers. Dhaka city, the capital of Bangladesh was considered a study area. All the women who work in the construction sector in the study area make up the population of the study. Among them, 10 (ten) women were purposively selected as they were willing to share their experiences and give information. Primary and secondary sources were used to obtain relevant data. Primary data were collected directly from selected respondents and the secondary data from research reports, books, journals, thesis, relevant publications of the government and non-government organizations. An in-depth interview method using a semi-structured interview guide was used as an instrument for data collection. The interview session was recorded in an audio recorder. A dairy had also been maintained to take short notes while discussing various issues with the respondents. Therefore, the collected data were checked and organized to look across all respondents and their answers to identify consistencies and differences. Throughout the analysis, the researcher had attempted to gain a better understanding of data with a focus on the objectives. Analysis and interpretation were made in a descriptive manner that reflects the actual picture of the situation and problems of women workers. The recorded words were transcribed verbatim to understand the respondent's exact and actual views.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Background of women construction workers

Construction workers usually come from low socio-economic backgrounds and therefore lack basic facilities (Shah & Tiwari, 2010). The present study found that nearly every woman lives in poverty and has previously engaged in agricultural or domestic work. The majority of them were middle-aged women who had come to Dhaka for a variety of reasons, including family disintegration, homelessness caused by river erosion, economic difficulty, and so on. They were unable to obtain further education, and they have only a poor educational background. Most of the women construction workers were found to be married. A few numbers of them were divorced and deserted. The majority of respondents lives

in households with more than five members and is responsible for their children's food, clothing, and educational expenses. One respondent (c) stated in this regard,

My family consists of one son and three daughters, as well as my father and mother-in-law. My son studies in class five, one daughter is married and another two are studying in class six and eight. It is tough to maintain my family with our small income which is not more than 12-15 thousand per month.

The majority of women workers, according to the study, live in slum areas with inadequate housing and living conditions in terms of sanitation, pure water, fresh air, a clean environment, and other modern amenities. The living area is highly crowded, and most of the houses are made of corrugated tin sheets with no ventilation. As a result, they are afflicted with diseases such as diarrhea, cholera, and various respiratory and infectious diseases. They live here under a contractual rental system despite the problems. According to the respondent (D),

I live in a rental house which is a tin-shade house. It is located in an unhealthy and crowded area with no essential amenities. I am forced to stay here due to a lack of money. We pay the rent and buy food with our monthly income, but there is no money left over for extra expenses. We can take fish or meat one day a week.

Most respondents stated that it is difficult to meet their necessities and that purchasing nutritious food is nearly impossible. They suffer from a variety of physical ailments including weakness, anemia, and other health issues as a result of their lack of nutrition.

3.2. Causes behind getting involved in construction work

Despite progress in numerous sectors, Bangladesh has a poverty rate of 20.5 percent (General Economics Division, 2020). It is a significant cause of women to be involved in construction work to support their families by tackling the wave of poverty. When asked about the cause, one of the respondents (B) expressed,

I was born in a very poor family. We had to pass the days when we could not buy rice because of money. I could not always give my children good food and clothes as their liking. I tried to do something better at first but failed. Finally, having exhausted all other options, I am currently employed in this field.

Dhaka city has a substantially higher cost of living (I. Ahmed, 2014). A low-income family may find it challenging to manage daily basic expenses such as house rent, children's education, and other essentials. As a result, many women began working in construction to support their husbands or other family members. Respondent (H) stated the following in this regard,

My family's sole source of income was my husband. He was having a hard time making ends meet. The expense of living began to rise gradually. This type of unexpected situation comes from time to time when we require extra money. As a result, I strive to compensate for the additional burden by increasing my income through this occupation.

Education is required in order for a person to be employable. However, the women in this study were found to be illiterate, which is why, having failed to obtain another prominent career, they have taken up this one. The respondent (D) claimed,

How can I acquire a job with a better wage if I have no education? Even though I could work as a house servant, I thought it would be more economical.

Widows, divorced, or deserted women in Bangladesh are disadvantaged far more than other women. The lack of a husband or breadwinner forces a woman to look for work outside the home in order to make ends meet. Unfortunately, many are forced to work as domestic servants or in the informal sector like construction work as unskilled workers for low wages. In this regard respondent(C) described,

My spouse abandoned me and my kids. My children are with me; I couldn't possibly abandon them. I have to accommodate their requirements. They request clothing and food. But I couldn't meet their needs because I hadn't done any work. I was eventually forced to work here.

According to the statement of the respondents, it is clear that poverty is the main reason behind engaging in this risky work because there was no other way to meet most of their daily needs. Apart from poverty, lack of suitable work, illiteracy, and a lack of family support were also identified as reasons for engaging in construction work.

3.3. Problems faced by the women construction workers

Despite the fact that the construction industry is continuously expanding, it is still an unorganized sector (Bhuiyan et al., 2016) in which the workplace is a perilous environment for both men and women, women employees confront additional hurdles. They are facing various kinds of discrimination and injustice such as a long time working hours, lower wages than the male workers, and little amount of leisure time, lack of inclusive facilities, safety measures, medical care facilities, physical and mental harassment. They never get their skills upgraded because they are only allowed to do particular types of work and usually assist the male workforce (devi, 2013).

3.3.1. Uncertain working hour

Uncertain working hour is another problem of women construction workers in Bangladesh. The working hour has been fixed by the Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 and it is eight hours. Section 109 of the BLA states that “no woman worker shall, without her consent, be allowed to work in an

establishment between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.” (Fidh/Odhikar, 2018). However, most employers do not adhere to it, and they constantly try to persuade employees to work longer hours. It is also evident in the construction industry, where workers, particularly women, do not have a set time to complete their daily tasks. The study found majority of respondent start working very early in the morning and work until late at night. In this regard one respondent (E) said,

“We don't have a specific time for our work; while we do have a set start time, we don't have a clear time for when we'll finish. Usually, it depends on the nature of the work. However, since I work as a helper, it is still night for us to return home after all the work is done.”

Another respondent (J) also stated,

Most of the time, we do minor jobs. We can't argue with our superiors when they tell us to clean the equipment and keep it safe when they depart after work. It takes time and we cannot finish our task in time. It usually happens every day.

3.3.2. Low wages and wage discrimination

Women around the world continue to earn less than men on average for the same work (Hausmann et al., 2008). However, Bangladesh is not exempt to this, and there are numerous examples of women suffering from wage disparities. The majority of men and women in the construction industry believe that women lack the necessary skills to perform specific construction activities. This thinking has resulted in gender discrimination in the construction industry (Barnabas et al., 2009). In Bangladesh, on October 8, 2012, the Ministry of Labor and Employment fixed the minimum wage for construction workers. Under the new regulations, the minimum wage for *jogalis* (helper) was fixed BDT 7,800 per month or BDT 425 per day in cities and BDT 6,950 per month or BDT 375 per day in rural areas (Fidh/Odhikar, 2018). However, the majority of women workers claimed that, while the government-set wages were insufficient, they were not receiving it properly. They earn lower wages, which are insufficient to keep up with their living standards. One respondent (C) stated,

I am performing this difficult work because I have no other options. However, the wage I receive is insufficient to meet my basic needs. You are aware that the price of things has increased. Every year, the rent is raised by the house owners. Employers, on the other hand, do not take this into account. They are always trying to deprive us.

Another respondent (D) also explained as,

I have been living in a house with six members of my family for a long time. I am the sole breadwinner in the family and do not have any other sources of income. As a result, I must rely only on my earnings

to maintain my family. My expenses are increasing every day but my wages are not increasing compared to that.

Women workers in the construction industry are not only paid less but are also discriminated against in terms of wages even though they have worked as hard as their male counterparts. According to a study, male *jogalis* (helper) in Dhaka reported earning BDT 450 (USD 5.29) a day, while women *jogalis* reported earning just BDT 400. (USD 4.71)(Fidh/Odhikar, 2018). In this research one of the respondents (F) reported about wage discrimination,

We do the same job as male laborers, but we get paid less. Even though we take the same risks as male workers and work the same hours, we do not receive the same wages. Doing the same task where they get BDT 600/700 daily, we get only BDT 350-500.

They are deprived of rights merely because they are women, according to respondents, and if someone complains about their wages, the authorities intimidate them by implying that if they paid the same amount, they would be able to hire more women. In this regard respondent (I) informed,

This is a form of discrimination against women workers in that we are paid less than male workers simply because we are women. We have nothing to do for this discrimination and if we make any excuses, the authority will terminate our employment. That is why we make no excuses.

Masons, helpers, fitters, supervisors, carpenters, and painters are among the workers who work in the construction industry(Bhuiyan et al., 2016). But the majority of the women are employed as helpers. Their work is naturally regarded as unskilled, and they are not given the opportunity to learn new skills. The male-dominated construction sector discourages women from pursuing careers as masons (Barnabas et al., 2009). However, one respondent (H) believes that the wage she receives is reasonable because she is unable to work as hard as her male coworkers. She explained,

We are not strong enough to work like male workers. Most of us work as their helpers where wages are not enough. I think it is not unreasonable and it is practiced everywhere.

3.3.3. No safety and security

Safety and security is the most essential part of all kinds of labors. The Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 (Amendment 2013) Section 78A sets obligation for using safety appliances for personal safety (Fidh/Odhikar, 2018). However, the construction sector is recognized as one of the most unsafe and hazardous industries in the country, with a significantly greater risk of accidents. Construction workers are three times more likely to die and two times more likely to be injured than workers in other industries(S. Ahmed et al., 2018). Accidents in the construction sites in Bangladesh result in the deaths of

150 people on average each year, with thousands more injured(S. Ahmed, 2019). Women workers have to work without using any safety equipment and they usually do all of their tasks by hand. They break bricks or stones; carry heavy construction materials without any protective equipment such as gloves, goggles, and helmets(Fidh/Odhikar, 2018). They have become accustomed to this environment. According to respondent (I),

We work without a helmet, hand gloves, safety jacket, belt, and other equipment in the working time at working place.

The most common accidents on construction sites are workers falling from great heights, falling objects, electrocution, slip and falls, scaffolding accidents, power tool and machinery accidents, ladder accidents, and so on (Rahman et al., 2020). On-site construction accidents are prevalent owing to a lack of knowledge or training, poor judgment or recklessness, and the use of the wrong machinery(S. Ahmed et al., 2018). RMMRU reports that almost 80 percent of construction workers in the capital city work in hazardous situation and without any protection(Biswas, 2014).

Even though the construction sector is highly hazardous, the owners are not committed to protecting the safety and security of their employees. They are hesitant to provide and maintain any safety equipment for the workers. In this regard one respondent (J) stated,

I don't have any safety gear to use. It was once mine, but it is now broken. In some regions, employers supply safety equipment. I believe that if we have hand gloves to wear at work, we can protect our skin and fingers.

Construction accidents and injuries can occur due to a lack of safety precautions(Ahmed et al., 2018). In this study, workers have been observed to be uninterested in using it. Employers may provide everything, but employees rarely use it. One respondent (E) explained,

It is our responsibility to protect ourselves. However, sometimes we are indifferent about it and forget to realize the importance of our lives. Employers make an effort to supply safety equipment when it is required, but we rarely use it. Many of us are hesitant to work with equipment for long periods, and this is yet another reason not to use it.

Due to lack of safety and security accidents occur so often in their workplace that many workers suffer physical and financial loss. This happens when they use hammers, cutting machines, sickles, spades, big axes, chisels, and other sharp tools quickly and carelessly. Negligent handling of such instruments results in severe pain, wounds, blood loss, and even death.

1.3.4. Lack of treatment facilities and sanitation

Construction workers mainly suffer from health hazards and diseases like hearing loss, skin diseases, allergies, asthma, lung cancer, headache, back pain, jaundice, silicosis, asbestosis, bronchitis, white finger disease, and neurological disorder. The National Occupational Safety and Health Policy of Bangladesh obligate to ensure treatment, compensation for the injured worker (Clause 4.a.12.). The newly amended Bangladesh labor Act, 2006 includes provisions such as the formation of workplace safety committees and the establishment of workplace health centers (Fidh/Odhikar, 2018). However, it is not effectively practiced particularly in the construction sector. Construction workers might be victims of accidents and health hazards at any moment due to the nature of their work and a lack of safety precautions. The study found that when women construction workers are injured at work, they do not receive any medical care on site. One respondent (F) explain the situation as,

In our workplace, there are no medical facilities or first aid. We have to go to the nearest drugstore for treatment when we have minor injuries. Colleagues, on the other hand, stepped forward to help in this situation. The supervisor had paid the first expense, but we were liable for the second. We were unable to attend work for several days as a result of the accident. This is especially detrimental to me and my family."

Section 91 of the Bangladesh labor Act, 2006 states: "(1) In every establishment, (a) the sufficient number of suitable bathrooms and washing facilities with provisions of their maintenance shall be provided for the use of the workers employed therein; (b) such facilities shall be provided separately for male and women workers, and they shall be properly screened; (c) such facilities shall be kept clean at all times and easily accessible" (Fidh/Odhikar, 2018).

The lack of bathroom facilities among construction workers, particularly women employees, was discovered in this study. In most construction sites, there are no toilets or washing facilities. Toilets and washing facilities are often inadequate for smaller projects or road construction (Fidh/Odhikar, 2018). Almost all the respondents replied like respondent (I),

It is our problem that we can not use the bathroom when we require it. It is simple for male employees to do it wherever. However, if a public toilet is nearby, we can use it.

3.3.5. Abuse at workplace

Workplace violence is a breach of human rights since everyone has the right to be treated with respect at work (Akhter et al., 2019). Women and men experience different types of violence at work: Across all industries, women are more likely to be victims of psychological and sexual abuse, whereas men are more likely to be victims of physical assault (WHO, 2011). Workplace harassment is

frequent in Bangladesh, yet the majority of cases go unreported. Almost all of the women workers in this study said that their bosses or conductors regularly insult, criticize, and speak harshly to them at work. Respondent (G) stated in this regard,

We are human, and it is natural for us to make mistakes. Employers, on the other hand, do not attempt to take this into account. They not only insult me but also use nasty comments in front of other coworkers if I do something wrong, which is embarrassing for me.

Physical violence in the workplace was reported by a few women workers; however it was less common than verbal abuse. Respondent (B) stated,

One day at work, I was talking to one of my coworkers. When the conductor noticed this, he slapped me in front of others. However, he didn't speak well and simply blamed me.

Women workers are subjected to harassment by their male coworkers, who regard them as opponents rather than peers, due to a lack of a safe and secure women-friendly working environment. About such unexpected situations, F, the respondent, stated,

Our male coworkers treat us with contempt and refer to us in derogatory terms. Some of them refuse to help us when we ask for. We feel insecure at work for their behavior.

In some cases, it was revealed that they were harassed by relatives or close friends who had previously assisted in their recruitment into this industry. According to the statement of respondent (A),

Because of our misfortune, we're working here. We accept it as our fate; otherwise, why should we be in such a situation after working so hard? The worst part is that we often have to face this type of behavior from our close ones.

Gender-based violence and harassment, particularly sexual harassment, is a regular phenomenon for women in Bangladesh. It's more common in places where men and women work together. This type of sexual harassment goes unreported because women employees are too embarrassed to speak out about it. The construction sector is not out of this problem where such incidents often occur. One of the respondents (H) shared as,

I have no personal experience, but a few days ago one of our women colleagues told me that one of our male colleagues had offered her money in exchange for a physical relationship with him. This is a matter of great concern.

IV. CONCLUSION

Bangladesh is also committed to safeguarding workers' rights. The constitution guarantees citizens the right to freedom of association, reasonable salaries, equal job opportunities, social security, and freedom from forced labor. The most important labor legislation, the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, regulates trade unions, working hours, minimum wage employment, and industrial relations. It includes workplace safety and health standards, as well as compensation for workplace injuries and accidents, maternity benefits, factory inspections, and child labor prohibitions. Besides, several government policies, such as the National Occupational Safety and Health Policy, the National Labor Policy, the National Child Labor Elimination Policy, the Industrial Policy, and the Children's Policy, provide guidelines for establishing workers' rights (BILS, 2015). Despite these legal and policy initiatives, the current study finds a number of problems faced by women in the construction industry. They are confronted with problems such as the casual nature of employment, uncertain working hours, unsafe working conditions, wage exploitation, and workplace harassment. To protect their rights and maintain a safe working environment for construction workers, efforts should be made to reduce and eliminate such problems. In this situation, the government, construction companies, and other stakeholders should step forward with a favorable attitude toward the development of this sector. Workers, in particular, must be covered by social security and other benefits. The majority of respondents believe that the government must ensure a decent income for women workers, as well as a safe and secure working environment. They also urged for legal protection and recognition through the enforcement of relevant laws.

In truth, everyone has the right to work and live a happy life. It is primarily the government's responsibility to provide facilities that safeguard women construction workers and improve their lives in whatever way possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to thank all of the participants for their cooperation.

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