

# GOLD VI

**Case-Based Contribution  
to Chapter 8: Prospering**  
*GOLD VI Report on Pathways  
to urban and territorial equality*

## The case of female workers in India's construction sector

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# The case of female workers in India's construction sector

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**CHAPTER**

8: Prospering

## SUMMARY

About 93% of construction workers in India are informal workers that undertake work without formal contracts and do not receive any form of social protection. Female workforce in this industry mostly comprises seasonal or temporary migrants from socially disadvantaged groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the Other Backward Classes. Research has shown that while female migration is a critical livelihood strategy, it does not necessarily improve women's economic and social status. On the contrary, occupational hazards coupled with lack of timely access to healthcare, inadequate sanitation facilities, unhygienic conditions, poverty induced malnutrition and anaemia have gendered health impacts for women. Women tend to migrate with their children. However, without suitable maternity protection, they are forced to work very late into their pregnancy and compelled to return to work within a few weeks of childbirth. While some examples of site-based creches can be seen in the country, there is an urgent need to build and expand models for childcare where the responsibility is with the employer as well as the state, with support for delivery from civil society organisations.

## Introduction

The construction sector in India has witnessed rapid growth in the past few decades. In 2019-20, the share of the sector in the total economic output of the country was 8%<sup>1</sup>. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2018-19, approximately 12% of the country's labour force was engaged in construction work, making the sector one of the largest employers of non-agricultural labour force.<sup>2</sup> Overall, this included 5.5% of the female workforce (rural – 6%; urban 5.5%) and 14.2% of the male workforce (rural – 15.4%; urban – 14.2 %). As in many other parts of Asia, the construction sector in India displays a mix of formality and informality. On one hand, it is governed by a set of laws closely scrutinizing land development and employment of high skilled workers [engineers, architects, planners], on the other, it is heavily dependent on semi-skilled [masons, plumbers, electricians and carpenter] and unskilled workers [manual workers, stone breakers, cleaners] that are employed informally.<sup>3</sup> About 93% of construction workers in India are informal workers that undertake work without formal contracts and do not receive any form of social protection.<sup>4</sup> Among women, 98% are employed informally.

The construction sector workforce is mostly comprised of seasonal or temporary migrants from socially disadvantaged groups such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and the Other Backward Classes (OBCs).<sup>5</sup> Women from these social groups are more likely to migrate in comparison to other social groups in order to maximize earnings to overcome material deprivation, landlessness and lack of income opportunities in the source regions.



### Two broad trends in recruitment patterns of migrant workers have been documented:<sup>6</sup>

**a)** contractors recruit groups of workers also known as labour gangs from the source region. Workers work and live under the patronage of the contractor who provides them housing, access to water and sanitation, financial credit and other forms of help while they live in the city **b)** workers migrate on their own once they are familiar with the city. They tend to live in temporary shelters either in slum areas, under the flyover or in tents. They seek work at the *nakas* or *labour chowks* - various points in the city where contractors come to hire workers on daily wages. Since construction sites are temporary worksites that are functional only

Female migrant worker engaged in daily wage work.  
Source: Divya Ravindranath

1. RBI, 2020

2. GOI, 2020

3. Deshingkar & Akter, 2009; Srivastava & Sasikumar, 2003

4. GOI, 2015

5. Zeitlyn, Deshingkar & Holtom, 2014

6. Desai, 2017

as long as the project is underway, workers are highly dependent on contractors as their social access to new work and the city is mediated by contractors. Female workers are known to migrate with both the labour gangs as well as part of family units that migrate on their own. Unlike the case of single female migrants that are engaged in domestic work, women and especially young girls in the construction sector migrate with their extended family or as part of larger kinship networks due to concerns of safety.<sup>7</sup> This remains an understudied subject in academic literature but the experience on the ground suggests that women routinely face verbal abuse and sexual harassment, and lack bargaining power at the work place.

**Research has shown that while female migration is a critical livelihood strategy, it does not necessarily improve women's economic and social status.<sup>8</sup> The three main constraints in this regard are:**

## Categorization of women's work and wages

Although construction sites provide income prospects to both men and women, it is differentiated in terms of the type of work and wages. Women are mostly hired to headload bricks and cement bags, break stones, mix mortar and cement, sift sand or clean. These tasks are categorized as menial and women often receive less than minimum wages, even though they are physically demanding and arduous. In several cities, where couples perform allied activities in pairs (example: men dig while women carry the headloads of sand or cement), women's wages are lower than that of men as they are considered to be helpers. Women rarely get an opportunity to upskill to higher paying jobs such as carpentry or plumbing.<sup>9</sup> Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a union of female informal workers, has tried to

initiate and extend skill training to women, however it has had limited success because of lack of continued access to training, cultural and social barriers, lack of confidence among women, discrimination and preference for male workers within the industry.<sup>10</sup> In recent years, with the construction sector becoming more mechanized, women's work has become even more precarious, irregular and piece-based, further reducing their prospects of earning a living wage.

## OSH and Gendered health impacts

The Contract Labour Act 1970 and the Inter-State Migrant Workers Act 1979 lay out norms on timely payment of wages, provision of water, toilet and washing facilities for workers across various sectors, including the construction sector. However, worksites routinely violate these norms that are critical to maintaining occupational safety, health and decent conditions of work. Since there is no direct relationship between the principal employer (builder or developer) and employee (informal workers), workers are rarely compensated for injuries or death caused due to accidents at the worksite.

Long hours of work, exposure to environmental pollution (loud noise, contact with chemicals, vibration from machinery), extreme weather conditions, risk of injuries or accidents are known to cause respiratory disorders, musculoskeletal problems, skin infections, hearing loss and psychiatric disorders.<sup>11</sup> Occupational hazards coupled with lack of timely access to healthcare, inadequate sanitation facilities, unhygienic conditions, poverty induced malnutrition and anemia have gendered health impacts for women. Reproductive health outcomes - disruption in menstruation cycles, complications during pregnancy, and increased incidence of neonatal death are exacerbated.<sup>12</sup>

7. Baruah, 2010

8. Mosse et al., 2002

9. Srivastava & Sutradhar, 2016

10. Baruah, 2010

11. Lakhani, 2004

12. Jatrana & Sangwan, 2004



## Social infrastructure and maternity protection

The maternity benefits programme seeks to provide partial compensation through direct cash transfer to women who incur wage loss due to childbirth and pregnancy. However, the programme remains largely inaccessible to women due to imposition of conditionalities and low compensation package.<sup>13</sup> Without suitable maternity protection, women are forced to work very late into their pregnancy and compelled to return to work within a few weeks of childbirth. Women migrate with their children, especially infants and children in need of maternal care. Sometimes, older children are brought to the city so they can assist in providing care support to women. At the worksite, children are at risk of injury due to falling objects, heavy machinery and ditches.

The Building and Other Construction Workers Act 1996 (BOCW Act) mandates provision of creches at construction sites and other facilities such as canteens for workers. Yet this type of social infrastructure remains unfulfilled in a majority of worksites. Consequently, women bear the triple burden of work, shoulder responsibility of domestic chores – cooking, cleaning, collecting firewood and childcare alongside waged labour.<sup>14</sup>

## Way forward

Creches run by not-for-profit organizations such as Mobile Creches in **Delhi** (India) and Aajeevika Bureau in **Ahmedabad** (India) at construction sites aim to mitigate concerns of childcare, prevent accidents and injuries among children and also create a space to address women's health needs. This model currently works on a cost sharing template between the not-for-profit organizations and the principal employer. There have also been efforts to link these creches to the existing infrastructure under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), which is India's oldest flagship programme to improve maternal and child health. The ICDS can provide Nutritional support for children and health monitoring of pregnant women and lactating mothers. There is an urgent need to build on and expand both these models where the responsibility is with the employer as well as the state, with support for delivery from civil society organisations.

<sup>13</sup> Ravindranath, 2019

<sup>14</sup> Ravindranath, Iannotti & Trani, 2019



Women encounter the triple burden of paid work, childcare and domestic chores. Source: Divya Ravindranath

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## PROSPERING

This paper has been produced as a Case-Based Contribution to the sixth Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD VI): the flagship publication of the organized constituency of local and regional governments represented in United Cities and Local Governments. The GOLD VI report has been produced in partnership with the Development Planning Unit (University College London), through the programme Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality (KNOW). GOLD VI focuses on how local and regional governments can address the local manifestations of growing inequalities and contribute to create “Pathways to urban and territorial equality”. The GOLD VI report has been produced through a large-scale international co-production process, bringing together over a hundred representatives of local and regional governments, academics and civil society organizations. This paper is an outcome of this process and is part of the *Pathways to Equality Cases Repository*, which collects the over 60 Case-Based Contributions produced as part of the GOLD VI report.

In particular, the present paper has contributed to Chapter 8 on “Prospering”, which focuses on prosperity as a culturally specific and multi-dimensional concept, including income but not only. The chapter explores key drivers of urban inequality reflected in the scarcity of decent work and in social-spatial disparities in the location of different productive activities within cities. The chapter analyses how local and regional governments can increase decent work opportunities, and, drawing on the impacts of COVID-19, how they can mitigate the effects of future pandemics and of climate change on decent work, urban prosperity and inequality.

Supported by:



**Funded by  
the European Union**

This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of UCLG and UCL and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



**Diputació  
Barcelona**

This document was produced with the financial support of the Barcelona Provincial Council. Its contents are the sole responsibility of UCLG and UCL and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Barcelona Provincial Council.



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This document has been financed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida. Sida does not necessarily share the views expressed in this material. Responsibility for its content rests entirely with the authors.



**UK Research  
and Innovation**

This document was produced by UCLG and the “Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality” (KNOW) programme. KNOW is funded by UKRI through the Global Challenges Research Fund GROW Call, and led by The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL. Grant Ref: ES/P011225/1