

A REVIEW OF THE INSTITUTIONAL AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS FACED BY WOMEN CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the various institutional and structural constraints that impact the lived experiences of female construction workers in India's informal labor market. Despite increasing participation in the construction industry, women continue to be sidelined due to a combination of legislative exclusion, inadequate social security, limited access to skill development, and entrenched patriarchal attitudes. Using descriptive analysis and thematic interpretation, the study investigates how these limits materialize in wage discrepancies, occupational segregation, and invisibility within labor governance frameworks. It emphasizes the combined load of paid labor and unpaid caregiving, the inadequacy of grievance redressal systems, and the absence of gender-sensitive health and safety measures. The findings highlight the critical need for inclusive labor policies, culturally relevant initiatives, and institutional reforms that acknowledge women as key contributors to economic growth. By combining statistical insights with narrative-driven research, the paper calls for a work ecosystem based on equity, dignity, and empowerment.

Keywords- Institutional constraints, structural constraints, women construction workers, informal sector, social security.

1. INTRODUCTION

In India, the building industry has become one of the fastest-growing parts of the economy over the past 20 years, making a big difference in GDP and job creation. Due to more people moving into cities, more infrastructure being built, and government programs like the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and Smart Cities Mission, there is a greater need for both skilled and unskilled workers in this industry. An important part of this growth, though, has been the use of informal labor. More than 90% of the workforce is working without official contracts, social security, or legal protections. Construction sites for everything from roads and bridges to apartment complexes have become places where people can find unstable work. Workers often have to do dangerous work with little supervision. Even though the sector is important to the economy, workers' rights are still not well protected in most of it. This is especially true for women, who are often pushed to the bottom of the job ladder.

India's informal job market has seen a big rise in the number of women working there, especially from groups that are poor or socially outcast. Due to a lack of other ways to make money, seasonal problems in agriculture, and the "feminization" of poverty, more and more women, especially those from Dalit, Adivasi, and migrant backgrounds, are going into building work (Devi, 2015). They usually get into this mostly male field through informal networks, contractors, or family ties, rather than through institutional help or skill-based hiring. However, women's involvement is marked by being invisible and exploited: they are often given unskilled tasks like carrying bricks, mixing cement, or cleaning up after construction sites, and they are paid much less than men who do the same work. They have to deal with extra problems like not having access to childcare or pregnancy benefits, being at risk physically, and being judged by others, which makes their work undervalued and unsafe (Aikaeli et al., 2014). The fact that there are more and more women working in building, even though they are still vulnerable, shows how important it is to look at the institutional and structural barriers that keep gender inequality going in the informal economy.

One of the most disadvantaged groups of workers in India, especially in the informal economy, is women who work in building. Even though they are becoming more common on building sites and often doing hard physical work like carrying bricks, mixing cement, and cleaning up after the work, their contributions are rarely mentioned in official labor statistics or policy discussions. These women usually go to work because they have to in order to make money, and they have to deal with risks that come from their caste, class, gender, and immigration status. Their work is unofficial, not controlled, and often not paid enough. They also don't have access to safety gear, maternity benefits, or ways to get their problems fixed. By focusing on this group, researchers can find out more about the complex facts of exploitation and resilience that shape their daily lives. It's not enough to just do gender-sensitive research for school; you have to do it all the time if you want to fully understand how work works in India. In the case of construction

work, this kind of research shows how women are routinely kept out of skilled jobs, not paid equally, and forced to do both paid and unpaid work (Atieno, 2006).

It also shows that there aren't enough policies and facilities that take gender into account, like crèche facilities, menstrual hygiene supplies, and safe transportation. By looking at things through the lens of gender, this study wants to not only produce rigorous academic findings but also socially transformative ones that can help shape policy frameworks that protect women workers' dignity, fairness, and justice.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In India, the informal labor market has long been marked by instability, lack of exposure, and systemic exclusion, especially for women workers. (Krcmar, 2022) pointed out that workers in informal jobs don't have contracts, social insurance, or legal protections because the jobs aren't regulated. In this situation, women who work in building are especially at risk because they often have to do hard physical work without getting paid fairly or being able to get help from welfare programs. Their work is shaped not only by the need to make money, but also by how race, class, and gender interact, which makes them even more on the outside (Medappa, 2022). Researchers who study how gender affects work have stressed how important it is to go beyond gender-neutral theories and use intersectional and situation-specific analyses instead. For example (Hegewisch & Hartmann, 2014) says that wage differences and occupational segregation in building work are not random, but are deeply based in patriarchal norms and institutional neglect.

Also, (Reuben, 2023) studies show that labor laws don't have enough gender-sensitive provisions. Programs like the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act are still not well administered and don't always meet the needs of women. These gaps show up as the lack of parental benefits, child care centers, and safety rules that are specific to women workers.

There is also a lot of research that shows how important representation and opinion are in shaping the results of work. Women working in the informal sector are routinely shut out of groups, site-level decision-making, and ways to get their problems fixed. This exclusion not only makes it harder for them to get better working conditions, but it also makes it harder for them to be seen in systems that control labor.

(Wani & Singh, 2025) also says that women's mobility, independence, and access to training are limited by cultural norms and informal worksite practices. She calls for a rethinking of labor policy that puts women's living experiences at the center. Even with these insights, there is still a lack of empirical study that combines statistical analysis with narrative-driven accounts of the lives of women who work in construction, especially in places like Jharkhand where the situation is unique. This study aims to fill that gap by looking at institutional and structural barriers with a gender-sensitive view and making policy-relevant suggestions based on field data and thematic interpretation.

3. OBJECTIVES

The study has the following two objectives-

To delineate institutional and structural constraints

To underscore consequences for policy and empowerment

4. INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Even though women in India's building industry are becoming more visible, their work is still shaped by a web of institutional constraints that keep them out, hidden, and at risk. These limits are not extraneous; they are built into the systems that are supposed to protect and control work. Systemic barriers make it hard for women construction workers to get rights, resources, and respect. These include weak legal protections, bad welfare programs, and a lack of gender-sensitive policies and representation (Delaney et al., 2018). The fact that they work informally adds to these problems because they are not covered by social security, skill-building programs, or ways to get their problems fixed. This part talks about the different kinds of institutional barriers that keep women from working in building. It shows how policy neglect, bureaucratic opacity, and structural bias all work together to keep gendered differences in the job market.

a. LACK OF LEGAL AND POLICY SAFEGUARDS- The absence of legislative and policy protections that acknowledge and value the labor of women construction workers is one of the most widespread institutional barriers they must overcome. The majority of women are employed through unofficial channels without formal contracts, which makes them susceptible to salary theft, arbitrary termination, and denial of benefits (Shamim et al., 2017). In addition to depriving them of legal options, this informality makes them even more invisible in labor statistics and policy frameworks. Even while laws like the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act were created to improve working conditions and provide welfare benefits, they are still not well implemented and are mostly gender insensitive. Despite being required by numerous labor rules, women's specific needs—such as maternity leave,

childcare, and assistance with menstrual hygiene—are rarely met on construction sites. Systemic exclusion and exploitation are sustained by the institutional failure to include gender equity into labor governance, which is reflected in the gap between legislative purpose and actual conditions on the ground.

b. ABSENCE OF SOCIAL SECURITY PROVISIONS- For female construction workers, the lack of social security benefits is a significant institutional obstacle that increases their economic precarity and restricts their long-term stability. The majority of women are not eligible for contributory schemes like the Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) and Provident Fund (PF), which provide financial protection, health coverage, and pensions, because of their informal employment status. Women are frequently uninformed of their eligibility or are not allowed to register at all, and access is still unequal and contractor-mediated even in cases where welfare boards are in place, such as those created under the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act. Documentation hurdles make it more difficult for many women to join in government programs or claim benefits because they lack necessary identity documents, bank accounts, or digital skills. They so continue to be excluded from the safety net designed to safeguard vulnerable workers, perpetuating cycles of dependency and poverty. In order to close these gaps, aggressive outreach and gender-sensitive implementation tactics that acknowledge the particular difficulties faced by women in informal construction employment are just as important as regulatory reform.

c. WEAK REPRESENTATION AND VOICE- Their underrepresentation in labor organizations and decision-making forums is a significant but frequently disregarded institutional barrier that affects women construction workers. Traditionally used as forums for collective bargaining and worker advocacy, labor unions frequently overlook the unique difficulties encountered by women in the industry in favor of male-dominated issues. Because of this, problems like gender-based pay gaps, inadequate sanitary facilities, and harassment at work go unchecked (Chaturvedi et al., 2022). This issue is made worse by the lack of official grievance redressal procedures; harassment, hazardous working conditions, and wage disputes are often not reported because of institutional backing, social stigma, or fear of reprisals. Women's lack of participation in site-level planning or policy-making procedures further contributes to their invisibility and deprives them of the ability to influence the terms of their employment. In addition to undermining their rights, this exclusion feeds a vicious cycle of disempowerment in which their voices are routinely silenced in forums that are supposed to defend and speak for them.

d. INSTITUTIONAL NEGLECT OF HEALTH AND SAFETY- The majority of health and safety regulations in the construction industry are created with male employees in mind, which leads to a conspicuous disregard for the unique requirements and vulnerabilities of women. Women's physical protection on dangerous sites is compromised by the lack of or inability to wear safety equipment including helmets, gloves, and harnesses. Beyond physical safety, reproductive health is frequently disregarded; women work long, hard hours and are exposed to dust, chemicals, and harsh weather conditions, all without access to sanitary facilities or assistance with menstruation. Despite the significant hazards to their health, these disorders are not addressed in policy and practice (Biswas, 2025). This is made worse by the lack of mental health assistance; the psychological effects of social isolation, employment discrimination, and the combined weight of paid and unpaid labor are rarely recognized, much less addressed. The essential need for gender-sensitive changes to occupational safety regulations is highlighted by the institutional indifference that not only jeopardizes women's health but also perpetuates their exclusion from the workforce.

e. LIMITED ACCESS TO SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING- Women still have limited access to skill development and training options in the construction industry, which perpetuates economic stagnation and occupational segregation (Adams et al., 2013). Because of institutional biases, women are frequently excluded from government-sponsored and private training programs because they are considered "unfit" for skilled jobs like masonry, carpentry, or machine operation. The idea that women are only suitable for laborious, unskilled jobs like brick carrying or site cleaning—roles that provide little compensation and little recognition—is maintained by this stereotyping of talents. Women are denied the opportunity to progress their careers, diversify their positions, or improve their abilities if they do not have access to formal training. They are stuck in a cycle of low-paying work with few opportunities for economic mobility or empowerment due to the lack of formal advancement channels. In order to overcome this limitation, the construction industry must adopt inclusive training practices as well as a cultural change in the way women's labor potential is viewed and developed.

5. STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

In addition to institutional flaws, women construction workers encounter ingrained structural limitations that influence their day-to-day experiences at work. These obstacles originate from systematic gender prejudices, workplace hierarchies, and social norms that have a significant impact on labor dynamics even in the absence of official policy. Wage gaps, occupational segregation, restricted access to resources, and cultural stigmas that impede women's

mobility and autonomy are examples of structural restrictions. In contrast to institutional gaps, which may be resolved by governmental changes, structural barriers are frequently imperceptible, accepted, and sustained by social norms and unofficial practices (Manhas, 2025). This section examines how these limitations, which restrict women's chances for skill development, career promotion, and respectable employment, interact with caste, class, and gender to further marginalize women in construction labor.

a. OCCUPATIONAL SEGREGATION- One of the most obvious and enduring structural barriers that women in the construction industry still have to deal with is occupational segregation (Hegewisch & Hartmann, 2014). Women are frequently given unskilled, labor-intensive jobs like brick carrying, cement mixing, or site cleaning—roles that are physically taxing but underappreciated and poorly paid—despite their physical stamina and increasing presence on construction sites. On the other hand, skilled jobs like carpentry, masonry, and operating machinery are primarily performed by men, which perpetuates long-standing gender stereotypes and prevents women from obtaining higher salaries and recognition in their fields. This division of labor is founded on long-standing preconceptions that hold women unsuited for technical or leadership positions rather than competence. Because of this, women are still only allowed to work on the periphery of construction, with limited opportunities for skill development or career advancement. In addition to inclusive hiring and training procedures, addressing occupational segregation calls for a cultural change in the way gender roles are viewed and performed in the workplace.

b. GENDER-BASED WAGE DISPARITIES- In the construction industry, where women are frequently paid less than males for doing the same duties, gender-based wage discrepancies continue to be a deeply ingrained structural limitation. Because wage decisions are frequently made informally by contractors without any established criteria or accountability processes, this discrepancy is rarely questioned or documented. In addition to often being ignorant of the current wage norms, women, especially those from underprivileged communities, lack the bargaining leverage to obtain adequate wages. This inequality is made worse by the lack of formal contracts and open payment procedures, which exposes women to wage theft and capricious deductions (Williams & Gashi, 2022). In addition to undervaluing women's labor, these practices support larger trends of economic exclusion in which a person's gender determines their value rather than their ability or effort. Both regulatory control and a change in public perceptions that legitimize the undervaluation of women's labor in physically demanding industries like construction are necessary to address wage inequality.

c. CULTURAL NORMS AND PATRIARCHAL ATTITUDES- Patriarchal attitudes and cultural norms are strong structural barriers (Xheneti et al., 2018) that influence how many women work in construction. The stigma attached to women working in physically hard, male-dominated jobs is well ingrained in many communities, limiting their freedom, autonomy, and public visibility. In addition to discouraging women from entering the field, these societal attitudes also restrict their capacity to pursue skilled positions or stay in it over the long term. Women are frequently given the majority of domestic work and caregiving responsibilities within families due to conventional gender roles, which leaves limited opportunity for steady or full-time employment. The idea that women's economic contributions are secondary is reinforced by the expectation that they balance job and domestic responsibilities, even when they do engage in construction work. Because of this cultural conditioning, women's labor is accepted but rarely encouraged or acknowledged as valid and empowering, perpetuating a cycle of undervaluation and exclusion.

d. INFORMAL WORKSITE PRACTICES- For women construction workers, informal workplace practices provide a serious structural barrier that shapes their access to jobs, responsibilities, and pay through gendered and opaque networks. Male-dominated informal institutions that function outside of official regulatory frameworks, like contractor networks, peer referrals, or site-level hierarchies, frequently manage hiring choices, task distributions, and wage negotiations. Because of their lack of visibility and power in these settings, women are more vulnerable to exploitation, capricious wage deductions, and exclusion from skilled positions. They are also rarely consulted or educated about worksite rules, safety procedures, or entitlements due to their minimal presence in these unofficial circuits. Their marginal status is strengthened by their invisibility, which also feeds a vicious circle of dependency in which male middlemen, rather than institutional support or merit, determine their ability to find employment. In order to overcome these limitations, formalizing labor practices is necessary, but so are conscious attempts to involve women in employment networks and site-level decision-making.

e. SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LACK OF PEER SUPPORT- The collective strength and emotional health of female construction workers are threatened by social isolation, a subtle but potent structural limitation. Women are more likely than men to work alone or in small, dispersed groups, which restricts their ability to form bonds, learn from one another, and engage in collective bargaining. The fear of harassment, societal criticism, and cultural taboos that prevent women from speaking openly on building sites all contribute to this division, which goes beyond simple

logistics. Women are unable to voice their complaints, organize for improved conditions, or even access unofficial networks that may provide opportunity and protection because there are no secure places for communication and assistance amongst themselves (Kaushik et al., 2022). Because of this, their experiences continue to be unique and unnoticeable, which makes it harder for them to demand change or defend their rights. In order to overcome this limitation, deliberate efforts must be made to promote community development and gender-inclusive workplaces in addition to implementing physical safety measures.

6. IMPACT ON WELL-BEING AND PARTICIPATION

The combined impact of institutional and structural limitations seriously jeopardizes the financial, emotional, and physical health of female construction workers. Long hours, inadequate sanitation, and limited access to reproductive health care are major threats to their physical health, and the lack of gender-sensitive health and safety procedures exposes them to dangerous working circumstances without proper protection. At the same time, the psychological effects of social isolation, occupational segregation, and wage discrimination lead to mental exhaustion, chronic stress, and low self-esteem. Without institutional support or acknowledgment, women are frequently compelled to balance two burdens: unpaid caregiving duties at home and demanding physical labor at work. Women who work in construction are frequently forced to carry two responsibilities that tax their mental and physical stamina.

At construction sites, they undergo strenuous manual labor, including lifting large objects, working long hours in inclement weather, and carrying out monotonous, physically demanding jobs. However, their obligations don't stop at the end of the workday. They are expected to perform unpaid caregiving duties at home, such as cooking, cleaning, raising children, and seeing to elderly family members. Employers, legislators, and even members of their own households seldom recognize this unrelenting cycle of paid and unpaid labor. Little to no institutional support is available to lessen this burden, such as community care systems, flexible work schedules, or childcare facilities. Chronic weariness, increased stress, and less time for relaxation, self-care, or skill development are the outcomes.

In addition to having an adverse effect on their well-being, this invisible labor serves to further the cultural belief that women's economic contributions are incidental, contingent, and disposable. Their vulnerability is increased by the absence of peer networks and grievance redressal procedures, which leaves them with little options when they are harassed, exploited, or experience emotional anguish. These limitations undermine dignity, agency, and the fundamental right to safe and fair labor in addition to having an impact on production. The type and degree of women's engagement in construction work are also significantly shaped by structural and institutional restrictions. Women are restricted to low-wage, unskilled jobs with little opportunities for upward mobility because they lack access to formal contracts, social security, or skill development programs. Long-term involvement is discouraged by cultural norms and patriarchal views, which frequently confine women to seasonal or transient employment that accommodates household responsibilities. Women are excluded from decision-making areas by male-dominated networks and informal employment practices, which furthers their lack of visibility and reliance on middlemen. Even when women do engage, their views are ignored and their labor is undervalued, leading to a precarious and exploitative kind of economic inclusion. These limitations not only restrict the amount of involvement but also lower its quality by keeping women from obtaining respectable, empowering, and long-term jobs. In addition to promoting gender parity, removing these obstacles is crucial to creating a labor ecosystem that values and develops its employees' full potential.

7. CONCLUSION

The experiences of Indian women construction workers show a complicated interaction between structural exclusion and institutional negligence that consistently jeopardizes their participation, rights, and well-being. These women continue to be marginalized in workplace hierarchies, invisible in legislative frameworks, and excluded from decision-making processes, despite having made major contributions to the expansion of the construction industry. They are denied access to fundamental rights and protections due to institutional limitations, including the lack of formal contracts, insufficient social security, and labor rules that are unsympathetic to gender. Their social isolation and economic fragility are further reinforced by structural hurdles that stem from informal workplace practices, occupational segregation, and patriarchal norms.

This study emphasizes the pressing need for a gender-sensitive rethinking of labor governance, one that challenges cultural presumptions that undervalue women's labor in addition to reforming current laws. A multifaceted strategy is needed to empower women construction workers, including accessible grievance procedures, open and transparent compensation structures, inclusive training programs, and community-based support networks. More significantly, it urges a change in perspective, moving away from the idea of women as auxiliary workers and toward their role as key

players in social and economic change. Addressing structural and institutional barriers brings us one step closer to creating a fair, respectable, and fully inclusive labor ecosystem.

The study's conclusions highlight how urgently labor laws pertaining to the construction industry, especially those governing the unorganized sector, need to be updated to take gender equality into account. The structural and institutional barriers that women construction workers must overcome are not unique occurrences; rather, they are a reflection of larger flaws in the laws, their application, and social responsibility. The Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act and other existing frameworks need to be reviewed to make sure they specifically address the requirements of women. This includes maternity benefits, childcare facilities, menstrual hygiene, and gender-sensitive safety procedures. Additionally, welfare board registration procedures must be made simpler and less centralized, with proactive outreach to female employees via community-based platforms and local government entities such as Mahila Sabhas and Panchayati Raj Institutions.

In order to eliminate occupational segregation and support women's access to technical training, certification, and career advancement, skill development programs need to be revised. This entails establishing inclusive training facilities, providing flexible work arrangements, and dispelling myths that women aren't suitable for skilled jobs. In order to eradicate gender-based discrepancies, wage transparency and enforcement procedures should be reinforced, and contractors should be held responsible for equitable compensation practices. In order to guarantee that women have secure, private channels for reporting harassment, hazardous working conditions, or wage infractions, grievance redressal procedures must also be established at the site level.

Beyond changing regulations, a culture shift is required, one that appreciates and acknowledges women's labor as valid, competent, and vital to the expansion of the industry. Community discussions, gender-sensitization training for supervisors and contractors, and public awareness campaigns can all aid in changing perceptions and promoting inclusive workplaces. Lastly, monitoring implementation, producing data, and promoting evidence-based policy interventions can all be greatly aided by cooperation between government agencies, civil society organizations, and academic institutions. These suggestions seek to establish a labor ecosystem that preserves women construction workers' opportunity, equity, and dignity by tackling both institutional and structural hurdles.

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