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# Prospects of Women Construction Workers in Tamil Nadu, South India

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## Abstract

The construction sector is one of the largest employers of women next to agriculture in India. This article analyses the data from a large sample of men and women construction workers, and proposes ways to empower women workers. Most of them are very poor and destitute, face harassment at both home and workplace and do the heaviest work. This study suggests training for women as masons to equalise their opportunities.

## Keywords

Women construction workers, gender discrimination, harassment, unequal wages

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## Introduction

In India, about 350–400 million people live in absolute poverty with a per capita annual income equivalent to US\$ 275; of these, a majority are women (Nandal, 2005). Most poor women need to work but according to the Census of India 2001, the total labour force is 402.5 million of which only 32 per cent (127 million) are women. The labour force participation rate of women is lower in India when compared to other East Asian, South-East Asian and developed economies (ILO, 2005). The Census of India 2001 reports that the female work participation rate in India is 25.7 per cent for women as against 51.9 per cent for men, exposing a large gender gap. The female work participation rate for Tamil Nadu, the state in which this study was carried out, was 58.96 per cent for men and 31.32 per cent for women. This is slightly better than the national level.

The construction sector is one of the largest employers in India as elsewhere in the world. In 1999–2000, there were 17.62 million workers in this sector, a rise of 6 million workers over 1993–94 (Government of India [hereafter GOI], 2002). The sector recorded the highest growth rate in the last two decades, doubling its share in total employment and played a major role in the healthy growth of the economy, where more than 95 per cent of workers are seasonal and temporary. Although construction is considered to be one of the principal industries in the country, the workers remain unskilled, exploited and discriminated against (Mathew, 2005).

Next to agriculture, this sector draws in the largest number of women. More than 50 per cent of the 31 million construction workers are women (GOI, 2008, p. 189) who work in exploitative conditions, their potential not fully utilised (ILO, 2001b). They are appointed as casual workers on a temporary basis and are paid lower wages. In some industries, women are employed for semi-skilled or skilled jobs and have prospects of promotion. But here, women workers are not allowed to acquire skills. Hence women begin their lives at the lower rung of the job hierarchy and remain there till the end of their lives (John and Sharma, 1997). They can never aspire to be painters, masons, carpenters, supervisors or contractors. They are forced to carry out hard menial physical labour for long hours under unsafe and inhumane working conditions. Empowerment of these women is the need of the hour. This study aims to determine the factors that contribute to the gender discrimination and exploitation of

women in this sector and suggest ways to empower them and improve their working conditions.

Discrimination implies treating one or more members of a specified group unfairly when compared to others. Article 1(1a) of the *Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention*, 1958 defines discrimination as 'any distinction, exclusion or preference made on the basis of race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin, which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity treatment in employment or occupation' (ILO, 2003, p. 16).

## Methodology

In 2008 the study was undertaken in Tiruchirapalli (commonly known as Trichy) which is the fourth largest city of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu (after Chennai, Coimbatore and Madurai). Situated in the centre of the state on the banks of the River Cauvery, Trichy is a corporation and the administrative headquarters of Tiruchirapalli district. According to the Census of India 2001, Trichy had a population of 2,418,366. Males constituted 49.97 per cent of the population and females 50.03 per cent. The total number of workers was 1,064,521 of whom 687,814 were male workers (64.6 per cent) and 376,707 were female (35.4 per cent). Tamil is the official language of Tamil Nadu.

The main data collection instrument used was an interview schedule, pre-tested with 70 respondents to ensure reliability and validity. The content validity of the questionnaire was then tested by a panel of experts. The primary data was collected with the help of two interview schedules, one prepared for 440 women and the other for the same number of men. They were interviewed in the local language (Tamil) and their responses noted.

## Profile of the Workers

Table 1 summarises the following facts. Most of the women workers were between 25 and 40 years of age; only a few worked after the age of 45. As the work is hard, there are fewer women over the age of 40.

**Table 1.** Personal, Social and Educational Background of Construction Workers

Socio-demographic Characteristics	WOMEN		MEN	
	$n_1$ (Total = 440)	Percentage of $n_1$	$n_2$ (Total = 440)	Percentage of $n_2$
AGE				
<18	18	4.1	10	2.3
19-20	32	7.3	59	13.4
21-25	75	17.0	78	17.7
26-30	117	26.6	93	21.1
31-35	80	18.2	77	17.5
36-40	56	12.7	49	11.1
41-45	38	8.6	42	9.5
>45	24	5.5	32	7.3
MARITAL STATUS				
Married	261	59.3	282	64.1
Unmarried	94	21.4	156	35.5
Divorced	20	4.5	1	0.2
Widow	65	14.8	1	0.2
ONLY EARNING MEMBER				
Yes	158	35.9	259	58.9
No	282	64.1	181	41.1
COMMUNITY				
SC	182	41.4	127	28.9
MBC	95	21.6	83	18.9
BC	146	33.2	212	48.2

REASON FOR ENTRY INTO THIS OCCUPATION	FC	17	3.9	18	4.1
Widow/ abandoned by husband- no other employment		75	17.0	121	27.5
Forced by Poverty		256	58.2	49	11.2
Many family members in this job		44	10.0	115	26.1
Own choice		65	14.8	155	35.2
Illiterate		225	51.1	90	20.5
Literate		215	48.9	350	79.5
Nil		185	42.0	64	14.5
3rd Standard		84	19.1	46	10.5
8th Standard		110	25.0	162	36.8
SSLC		50	11.4	129	29.3
HSC		11	2.5	26	5.9
UG		0	0.0	10	2.3
PG		0	0.0	3	0.7

**Source:** Authors' own data.

**Notes:**  $n_1$  – Number of women construction workers,  $n_2$  – Number of men construction workers.

FC – Forward Caste, BC – Backward Caste, MBC – Most Backward Caste, SC – Scheduled Caste, SSLC – Secondary School Leaving Certificate, HSC – Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate, UG – Under Graduate, PG – Post Graduate.

There were also more widows (14.8 per cent) and divorced women (4.5 per cent) than widowed and divorced men (only 0.2 per cent). Nearly one out of three women (35.9 per cent) in construction was the only earning member in the family.

The lowest castes in India are the Scheduled Castes (SCs) who are treated as untouchables in rural areas even now although untouchability is a crime in law (Borooah, 2005; Srinivas, 1962). They are not treated on par with the higher castes and are isolated. There are also others who belong to Most Backward Castes (MBCs) and Backward Castes (BCs). Their status in society is higher than that of the SCs but they too are not well accepted by the higher castes. These lower castes live below the poverty line and most often fill the construction sector.

As per the Census 2001, the number of SC men (16.4 per cent) is equal to the number of SC women in Trichy (16.7 per cent) but more women (41.4 per cent) than men (9 per cent) from this caste work as labourers in this sector. More than half of the workers are from the backward castes and very few from higher castes. This is consistent with the conclusion of Madhok (2005) who found that the majority of construction workers come from the SCs and OBCs.

Table 1 shows that nearly three out of four women were forced to enter construction work because of poverty and unemployment. More than half of the women were engaged in construction work (56.6 per cent) due to poverty compared to men (10.7 per cent). Though Trichy has a female literacy rate of 88.73 per cent, more than half (51.1 per cent) of the women construction workers were illiterate. The majority of the men in the sample were literate. Only 14.5 per cent of men were uneducated. Nearly 30 per cent had completed high school. There were even a few undergraduates and post-graduates among them. Educated men enter this sector because men are paid quite well and have work opportunities with higher wages. Men can rise to the position of mason and even become a contractor.

More than half the workers live in rural areas and work in the urban areas. More men workers (59.8 per cent) were migrants from other places, when compared to women (35.5 per cent). Unemployed men move more easily from rural to urban centres like Tiruchirapalli for employment. More than half the women (56.6 per cent) preferred to work near their home (within 5 kms), when compared to men. Both men and women preferred to walk or take a bus to work.



## Working Conditions

Table 2 shows that nearly 10 per cent of women workers did not have safe drinking water, that more than half of the women worked without toilet facilities, three out of four women worked without a canteen nearby and two out of three women could not access first aid at the workplace. Only a few women left their children in crèches, the majority of them leaving them with relatives. Even though these facilities are a necessity by legislation, they are not provided in all workplaces. This is consistent with the ILO (2001a) report that in most countries there was no provision of facilities that women desperately need at worksites.

Women are generally harassed and discriminated against on worksites in unorganised sectors. Table 3 shows that 45.7 per cent of women and nearly 25 per cent of men said that there is verbal abuse of women

**Table 2.** Facilities for Women Construction Workers

Facility Details by Women Construction Workers		$n_i$ (Total = 440)	Percentage of $n_i$
DRINKING WATER	Yes	400	90.9
	No	40	9.1
TOILET	Yes	214	48.6
	No	226	51.4
CANTEEN	Yes	108	24.5
	No	332	75.5
FIRST AID	Yes	148	33.6
	No	292	66.4
CHILDCARE	Govt. Crèche(Balvadi)	32	7.3
	Relatives/wife/parent	9	2.0
	Taken to workplace	4	0.9
	Neighbours	148	33.6
	Goes to school	69	15.7
	Grown up	167	38.0
	Unmarried/No children	167	38.0

**Source:** Authors' own data.

**Note:**  $n_i$  – Number of women construction workers.

**Table 3.** Harassment of Women Construction Workers at the Workplace

Harassment of Women at Work	WOMEN		MEN		
	$n_1$ (Total = 440)	Percentage of $n_1$	$n_2$ (Total = 440)	Percentage of $n_2$	
VERBAL ABUSE	Yes	201	45.7	109	24.8
	No	239	54.3	331	75.2
EVE TEASING	Yes	15	3.4	6	1.4
	No	425	96.6	434	98.6
CRITICISM AT WORK	Yes	35	8.0	67	15.2
	No	405	92.0	373	84.8
SEXUAL HARASSMENT	Yes	6	1.4	2	0.5
	No	434	98.6	438	99.5
NO HARASSMENT	Yes	152	34.5	240	54.5
	No	288	65.5	200	45.5
CONTRACTOR'S ATTITUDE	Arrogant	73	16.6	5	1.1
	Abusive	27	6.1	40	9.1
	Friendly	236	53.6	328	74.5
	Kind	104	23.6	67	15.2

**Source:** Authors' own data.

**Notes:**  $n_1$  – Number of women construction workers,  $n_2$  – Number of men construction workers.

at work. Some women and men agreed that there is eve teasing at work and that regular employment was denied to women. More men than women said that women were criticised at the workplace. A minority of men and women agreed that women are sexually harassed at the workplace. More women (22.7 per cent) reported that the contractors were arrogant and abusive. Women complained that they faced harassment but were scared of admitting what type of harassment they suffered—obviously worse than verbal abuse. This is consistent with Haripriya's (2000) study in Kerala (India) which reported that women construction workers are exposed to various types of violence from co-workers and contractors.

## **Wages and Work**

There is severe wage discrimination. More women (14.1 per cent) than men (5.5 per cent) got daily wages which shows that women are hired on a daily basis. More women (11.8 per cent) paid commission out of their wages to masons or contractors than men and paid higher amounts than men.

According to the Wage Cell (2010), the minimum wages for an unskilled construction worker in Tamil Nadu is ₹180 (The Gazette of India, 2008) but more than 90 per cent of women received wages below the minimum wage. This is supported by various empirical studies in India in the last century that have shown that the wages of women workers in the construction industry have been significantly below the minimum wage (Anand, 1998; Cherian and Prasad, 1995; Sinha and Ranade, 1975). The family income of women is much less than men's. No man received less than ₹70 per day as wages, while 6.4 per cent of women received less than that. No woman received more than ₹150 per day whereas more than half (55.5 per cent) of the men earned more than that amount. The wages of women ranged from ₹51 to ₹150. The wages of men ranged from ₹71 to more than ₹250. The average wage for women was only ₹92 whereas the average wage for men was ₹170. Men on an average get nearly twice the wages of women. Thus, women do most of the hard work in construction but are denied the right to an equal wage.

The only reason that men are paid more is that men are in a position to demand more wages whereas women have no say in wage fixation. Men are assigned skilled work which fetches higher wages whereas women are restricted to unskilled head loading and menial jobs; moreover men are paid more for the same type of work carried out by women.

Women and men get regular employment but the number of days that women work is less than men's working days. Table 4 shows that only 58.4 per cent of women got work for 21 to 25 days in a month and more women got work for less than 20 days because women are preferred for shorter spells of work. Despite the injustices, women choose to work in construction mainly because it pays more than domestic service or agricultural work.

## Opportunities for Promotion

Construction is a sector where people joining in the lowest cadre can be promoted and reach the top level, but as mentioned before women are denied such opportunities (Table 5). Women prefer to work in projects under the same contractor. They also prefer to be on contract in projects rather than be engaged on a daily basis. Nearly half of the women had less than five years' experience. As the number of years of experience increases, the number of women workers decreases. Many men had working experience of more than 10 years when compared to women; only a few women lasted as long as 25 years in the sector—women workers find it difficult to continue the hard work after 40 years of age.

All the 440 women interviewed in this research study were working at the same job they had held from the start, whereas men had progressed better. Women have only one designation: *chithal* (one who is small). Women enter as *chithal* and retire as *chithal*. Women's work status remains unchanged (Habitat, 1997).<sup>1</sup> Men have many job titles like centering labourers, *periyal* (one who is big), *manvettial* (one who digs), masons and contractors. Women workers serve and assist skilled male workers by carrying stones, bricks and mortar. This is very heavy work and requires more physical strength than masonry. Work differentiation is based on what is considered appropriate for each sex, not on capabilities/physical capacities. So women do not outgrow their positions and never

**Table 4.** Discrimination in Wages and Work

Socio-demographic Characteristics	n <sub>1</sub> (Total = 440)	Percentage of n <sub>1</sub>	n <sub>2</sub> (Total = 440)	Percentage of n <sub>2</sub>
<b>FAMILY INCOME (in ₹)</b>				
<1000	11	2.5	0	0.0
1000-2000	146	33.2	32	7.3
2001-3000	156	35.5	147	33.4
3001-4000	94	21.4	141	32.0
4001-5000	23	5.2	93	21.1
>5000	10	2.3	27	6.1
<b>PERIODICITY OF WAGES</b>				
Daily	62	14.1	24	5.5
Weekly	372	84.5	411	93.4
Monthly	0	0.0	4	0.9
On completion of certain work	6	1.4	1	0.2
<b>COMMISSION PAID</b>				
Yes	52	11.8	22	5.0
No	388	88.2	418	95.0
<b>COMMISSION (in ₹)</b>				
<5	6	1.4	2	.5
5-10	43	9.8	18	4.1
>10	3	0.7	2	0.5
Not Applicable	388	88.2	418	95.0
<b>NO REGULAR EMPLOYMENT FOR WOMEN</b>				
Yes	54	12.3	63	14.3
No	386	87.7	377	85.7
<b>DAYS OF WORK PER MONTH</b>				
0-5	0	0.0	3	0.7
6-10	9	2.0	9	2.0
11-15	33	7.5	7	1.6

(Table 4 continued)

(Table 4 continued)

Socio-demographic Characteristics	$n_1$ (Total = 440)	Percentage of $n_1$	$n_2$ (Total = 440)	Percentage of $n_2$
16-20	141	32.0	105	23.9
21-25	257	58.4	316	71.8
51-60	14	3.2	0	0.0
61-70	14	3.2	0	0.0
71-80	55	12.5	8	1.8
81-90	63	14.3	2	.5
91-100	218	49.5	13	3.0
101-110	41	9.3	12	2.7
111-120	17	3.9	10	2.3
121-130	11	2.5	45	10.2
131-140	6	1.4	31	7.0
141-150	1	0.2	74	16.8
151-160	0	0.0	3	0.7
161-170	0	0.0	16	3.6
171-180	0	0.0	43	9.8
181-190	0	0.0	23	5.2
191-200	0	0.0	53	12.0
201-210	0	0.0	29	6.6
211-220	0	0.0	12	2.7
221-230	0	0.0	9	2.0
231-240	0	0.0	1	0.2
241-250	0	0.0	49	11.1
>250	0	0.0	7	1.6

**Source:** Authors' own data.

**Notes:**  $n_1$  – Number of women construction workers,  $n_2$  – Number of men construction workers.

**Table 5.** Discrimination in Promotional Opportunities

Characteristics	$n_1$ (Total = 440)	Percentage of $n_1$	$n_2$ (Total = 440)	Percentage of $n_2$
<b>CONSTRUCTION TYPE</b>				
Domestic	187	42.5	186	42.3
Commercial	126	28.6	159	36.1
Government	116	26.4	88	20.0
Other	11	2.5	7	1.6
<b>CONTRACT TYPE</b>				
Daily basis	172	39.1	210	47.7
Project	268	60.9	230	52.3
<b>CONTRACTOR</b>				
Remains the same	276	62.7	236	53.6
Change often	164	37.3	204	46.4
<b>EXPERIENCE (in Years)</b>				
<5	213	48.4	170	38.6
6-10	129	29.3	141	32.0
11-15	61	13.9	61	13.9
16-20	25	5.7	39	8.9
21-25	4	0.9	17	3.9
>25	8	1.8	12	2.7
<b>JOB TITLE</b>				
Chithal	440	100	25	5.7
Others (painters, carpenters)	0	0.0	59	13.4
Centering labourers	0	0.0	34	7.7
Periyal	0	0.0	87	19.8
Manvettial	0	0.0	43	9.8
Mason	0	0.0	192	43.6

**Source:** Authors' own data.

**Notes:**  $n_1$  - Number of women construction workers,  $n_2$  - Number of men construction workers.

really progress in this profession to become masons, supervisors or contractors. This is consistent with the observation made by Shah (1996) that the female workforce in construction in India is at the bottom end of the industry, as unskilled workers or head-load carriers. Access to training is denied to them. Similarly Lingam (1998) reported that women remained as head loaders whereas men moved up to become helper, mason, supervisor and even a contractor. All these findings are supported also by a field survey in the two cities of Ahmedabad (Gujarat) and Trivandrum (Kerala) in India (Kakkad, 2002). In Karnataka, Suchitra and Rajasekhar (2006) too found that women construction workers are, in general, unskilled workers and paid wages lesser than male unskilled workers. The few women workers they interviewed mentioned that no matter what skills they learnt (for instance, some had learnt bricklaying and basic masonry), they were always classified as unskilled and paid the associated wage.

Despite all this, about 43 per cent of both men and women are of the opinion that there is no gender discrimination in the construction sector. More men (40.7 per cent) admitted that there is gender discrimination than women (23.4 per cent). Nearly one third of the women were not sure what gender discrimination is, because their cultural, religious and social worldview and poor and deprived status did not enable them to recognise it.

## Remedial Steps

According to the *Global Gender Gap Report* (Hausmann, Tyson and Zahidi, 2008), released by the Swiss-based World Economic Forum, India was ranked 113 out of a total of 130 countries. India was ranked 125 in economic participation and opportunity, 116 in educational attainment, 25 in political empowerment and 128 in health and survival. In the previous report of its kind, India's rank was 112 out of 128 countries. This shows that there is a large gender gap in India when compared to other countries. There are various factors which contribute to gender discrimination in India.

Most of the subcultures in India practice gender discrimination and favour boys and men, undervaluing girls and women. In families, sons



are taught that they are superior to daughters and women are forced to be submissive to men. In most families, women are not treated as partners—they are treated as servants who exist to serve men. In some local societies female infanticide, foeticide and dowry are practiced. Parents of girls are expected to pay large amounts in gold or cash or property as dowry before marriage, a practice that encourages parents to favour male children (Clark, 2000).

Women's potential is dormant. As the first step to empower women, the willingness of women construction workers to be trained as masons was studied. Despite the fact that women workers have to bear the double burden (at home and outside), and have to suffer abuse, harassment and discrimination at work, they were eager to improve their skills and future career prospects. Nearly half the women were willing to be trained as masons while 18 per cent were not sure. Only about 30 per cent were not willing to be trained. This is consistent with the findings by Vankar (2005) in a study of construction workers in Ahmedabad (Gujarat).

Table 6 shows the cross tabulation results for experience of male masons and their willingness to train women workers as masons. We found that 57.8 per cent of male masons were willing to train women. As experience increases, the willingness to train women also increases.

This study has shown that awareness of gender discrimination is very low among women construction workers. Awareness can be increased through media like radio, television and films, and by educating them about their rights. Dissemination of awareness programmes by the Tamil Nadu government led to the establishment of many all-women police stations and has helped many women to take up jobs in the police department. Similarly, proper awareness, education, motivation and opportunity will help women construction workers to take up masonry work and move up the ladder. Training programmes for these women have to be organised, and women must be trained and certified by government training institutes and educational institutions for masonry jobs; male masons could train them at the workplace.

Preferential placements of certified skilled women workers as masons in government funded building projects, public housing and private infrastructure projects can be enforced by suitable legislation. Tax exemptions can be given to construction companies that hire certified, skilled and qualified women workers. Legislation can make it mandatory for all registered contractors to employ a minimum number of certified women

**Table 6.** Impact of Experience on Willingness of Men Masons to Train Women Construction Workers as Masons

		Experience of Men Masons in years						Total
		<5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	>25	
WILLINGNESS TO TRAIN WOMEN	Yes	C <sup>a</sup> 18	37	23	19	8	6	111
		% <sup>a</sup> 50.0	50.0	63.9	61.3	88.9	100.0	57.8
	Not sure	C <sup>a</sup> 10	12	6	2	1	0	31
		% <sup>a</sup> 27.8	16.2	16.7	6.5	11.1	0.0	16.1
	No	C <sup>a</sup> 8	25	7	10	0	0	50
		% <sup>a</sup> 22.2	33.8	19.4	32.3	0.0	0.0	26.0
Total	C <sup>a</sup>	36	74	36	31	9	6	192

**Source:** Authors' own data.

**Note:** <sup>a</sup> Counts.

masons. Steps must be taken to educate the public as well as contractors so that women may be appointed with minimum wages fixed by the government. Such positive steps by the government, non-government organisations (NGOs) and welfare unions would enhance the appointment of women workers as masons, who could in turn function as mentors and motivators of other women. Empowerment in this manner will considerably reduce gender discrimination and there will be proper representation at the supervisor or contractor level so that needs of the women are met.

In Kerala, the Mahatma Gandhi University offers a three month certificate training course for masons (Jacob, 2008). Most of the workers trained in this course are women. After teaching them the basic theory of masonry, these workers are sent to local construction sites for practical training. Their incomes have increased by more than 300 per cent. They have not yet been accepted as full-fledged masons at the worksites, but are accepted as assistants to male masons and are paid a higher salary. A woman who starts her career as an assistant will have the opportunity to develop into a full-fledged mason since women are as skilled as men, and also very conscientious at work. Training and certification from a government recognised agency or university will be the first step to work for gender equality in the construction sector. The success of the endeavour in Kerala shows that such efforts can be also made in Tamil Nadu and other states and implemented in government funded projects. Legislation can be enacted to reserve 30 per cent of jobs in the construction sector for certified women masons and implement minimum wages for all women. This will increase women's capabilities and equalise their opportunities. Much else must be done too to increase facilities at worksites and improve working conditions for women in this sector.

## Note

1. The study on *Women Constructing Their Lives: Women Construction Workers—Four Evaluative Case Studies* (Habitat, 1997) details four case studies—from India, Mexico, Ghana and Jamaica. Of the four case studies, India portrays the most rigid forms of gender discrimination; the results show that the outcome of the impact of training on women measured in terms of their ability to acquire employment as skilled workers, in both Chennai, Tamil Nadu and Mumbai, Maharashtra is negative. When skilled women search for jobs, they face discrimination when they compete with men for employment.

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