

**UNHEARD VOICES  
BEHIND THE CONCRETE  
WALLS: THE PLIGHT  
OF WOMEN MIGRANT  
CONSTRUCTION  
WORKERS IN ASSAM**

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**BONYA BARUAH**





ZUBAAN

128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor

NEW DELHI 110 049

EMAIL: [contact@zubaanbooks.com](mailto:contact@zubaanbooks.com)

WEBSITE: [www.zubaanbooks.com](http://www.zubaanbooks.com)

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# **UNHEARD VOICES BEHIND THE CONCRETE WALLS: THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN MIGRANT CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN ASSAM**

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Construction workers are a significant part of India's human resources who make an immense contribution to the economy. Construction workers are generally migrants from rural to urban areas. Migration of labourers from rural to urban areas is an ongoing process. A huge number of labourers migrate to urban areas in search of better livelihood opportunities in this age of rapid expansion of industrialization and urbanization. These migrant labourers generally work in the unorganized sectors where the global economy and rapid urbanization have generated new sources of employment. Some migrant labourers work as seasonal labourers and return to their native places after their work ends. Some others work in urban areas permanently. According to the National Labour Ministry, unorganized labourers can be categorized in terms of occupation, pattern of engagement, classification of work and special classification. The Labour Ministry has identified some characteristics of unorganized

labourers: they are generally illiterate or dropouts; they are not skilled; their work is not permanent and their work environment is not sound and secure. The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS) estimates that 90 per cent of the workers in the labour force are unorganized workers, and 52 per cent of these are employed in agriculture and related sectors (Acharya and Reddy, 2016). A survey carried out by National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) estimated that in 2011-12, out of the total employment of 47 crore in both organized and unorganized sectors, about 39 crore were in unorganized sector and about 8 crore were in the organized sector. The unorganized sector provides more than 90 per cent of the total employment in the country (Venkatesh, 2017). According to another NSSO survey, in 2012 there were 20.4 and 15.9 per cent migrant labourers in agriculture related sectors and the manufacturing industry respectively. The construction sector consisted of 36.2 per cent migrant labourers (Srivastava and Sutradhar, 2016). Employment in the construction sector has been growing rapidly over the last few years. Construction workers are employed in building roads, houses, hospitals, bridges and dams. The gross domestic production of the construction sector in India increased on average by 14.58 per cent per year during 2002-2012 (Reserve Bank of India, 2008). According to data from the National Commission for Enterprise in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS), about 94 per cent of the unorganized women migrant workers were engaged in agriculture, construction, transportation, mining, manufacturing and small and medium industries (Acharya and Reddy, 2016).

Though construction is a booming sector today, the workers in this sector are still deprived of minimum rights and basic facilities. Job insecurity in the sector is increasing, and construction workers are deprived of several facilities available to others working in the unorganized sector. For example, they get no holidays or leave; their salaries are not fixed and vary according to their employers; and they are not paid overtime even though their work continues till late at night. The construction sites where they work are not safe, and the

workers face the risk of getting injured; there are no proper security systems for the workers. If a worker gets seriously injured at the work site, he/she does not receive any financial assistance from the employer.

Women constitute a large proportion of construction workers. Women construction workers suffer problems related to their health, sanitation, social security and bringing up their children. They are vulnerable to such problems due to gender differences. There is no provision for any leave (either casual, medical or maternity) for women construction workers. They do not get leisure time or a break during work hours to feed or take care of their children. Women labourers also suffer due to a lack of drinking water and proper sanitation at the construction sites. Employers engage women workers for the same jobs that men do like carrying cement, sand, bricks and other construction material. Women workers are treated as unskilled labourers, and they are not given a chance to develop their skills through training. Further, women construction workers get wages that are lower than what the male workers do. Besides, security is not provided to women labourers at construction sites though sometimes, they have to work till late at night. They cannot complain against sexual or other harassment by the employer, contractor or fellow worker. Moreover, women construction workers suffer several health-related problems because they have to stay at the construction sites amidst dust and cement for long hours.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper brings to light the unheard voices of the women construction workers in the Sijubari area of Hatigaon in Guwahati under the Kamrup Metro district of Assam. Hatigaon near National Highway 37 is about 8 km from Guwahati Railway Station and about 23 km from the airport. The Sijubari area in Hatigaon is 4 km away,

situated on the south of Assam Secretariat in Dispur, Guwahati. The study covers 30 women construction workers living in the Sijubari area. These workers migrated from other districts of Assam like Bongaigaon, Nalbari, Barpeta, Dhubri, Goalpara, Chirang, Darrang and Morigaon for better livelihood opportunities after losing the sole earners in their families. Most of the women who were interviewed belonged to the Muslim community. Their interviews bring to light several problems and challenges that they face.

## **STORIES BEHIND CONCRETE WALLS**

Reminiscing about the catastrophic day when her husband died, 40-year-old Hanufa Bewa bursts into tears. The death of the only earner in the family in 2008 brought about drastic changes in her life. 'I don't want to remember the situation I faced at that time. I had no money to feed my only son. As my husband was a cancer patient, all our savings had been spent on his treatment. Our relatives did not help us, and we were isolated by them as they believed that cancer is a communicable disease. I was left alone with my child. There was not a penny in my hand. Our only property, our home, was in mortgage and I had a huge debt. I was helpless and stayed hungry for three days after which I came to Guwahati with the help of a neighbour. Migrating to this city changed the course of my life. The person who helped me in coming to Guwahati introduced me to a group of women working at construction sites. I stayed in a rented house with my son. We have been staying in the same compound for about 10 years; all the residents here are construction workers. I have been working at different construction sites in Guwahati and now my daily wage is Rs 300. I am trying to save money from this low income so that I can get back my land by paying Rs 30,000. We have very little construction work in summer so we have to find other work. No facilities are

available for poor and needy people. The government schemes are only for the rich,' said Hanufa Bewa.

She is depressed because of job insecurity and scarcity of jobs for construction workers. Hanufa has been suffering from a throat infection, breathing problems and allergies due to staying for long hours in cement and dust. She does not have enough money for her treatment. Her son is her only ray of hope amidst all her difficulties. Hanufa has a dream of educating her son who might think and do something for deprived people like her.

Ajimun Nesa, 35, migrated to Guwahati six years ago in search of work after her husband died. She came from Mukalmua in Nalbari district. She has five children; two daughters are married and the other three are studying in a government school. Said Ajimun Nesa, 'We had enough farming land in our village but it was submerged in a flood. We have no home or property there. We have been living in a single room paying Rs 1,500 as rent every month. It is very tough for a single mother to feed her family of four members. The scarcity of construction work is a huge problem for us because we have no land, property or savings. We depend only on daily wages. I am unable to pay the rent for several months. How can I manage both the daily needs and the house rent? Moreover, I have been working at construction sites for several years which has deteriorated my health. I have been suffering from breathing difficulties, cough and allergy and my children also have these health problems. I do not have money to get treatment.'

Punam Sutradhar, a 30-year-old woman migrated to Guwahati from Sidli in Bongaion district about seven years ago. She comes from a farmer's family which owned sufficient land for farming. But her husband contracted a critical disease, and they had to mortgage their land and property to pay the medical bills. After her husband's death, Punam came to Guwahati with her three children to look for work. Since then she has been involved in construction work. But she is disappointed as work opportunities in the sector have reduced in the last three to four years. She says that now it is very difficult to arrange two meals a day with what she earns. She has not been able to pay for

her children's education, and they have dropped out of school. Punam is scared about the future because of lack of security and scarcity of work in the construction sector.

Ramecha Khatun, 50, migrated from Patladhowa char area of Barpeta district 20 years ago after her husband's death. She started work as a construction worker, but after a few years, she was compelled to leave this work. Ten years ago, she fell down from the top of a building when she was carrying construction material. She was severely injured, and her right arm and hand were fractured. She was bed-ridden for a year. She got no financial assistance or compensation from her employer. The injuries are still painful because there was a lack of proper and timely medical care. She lost her job after the injury, and now she earns a living by selling disposable goods and sometimes works as a maid.

Hanufa Begum, a 37-year-old construction worker migrated to Guwahati from Kharupetia in Darrang district 15 years ago. Her husband was also a construction worker, but he died six months ago (interview conducted on 03/11/18) due to a serious injury at the construction site. He was injured when a machine fell on him. The family did not get any compensation for his death. The incident was a nightmare for Hanufa, as she did not have enough money even for her husband's last rites. Her co-workers collected some money and helped her arrange the funeral. 'After that incident, I have to manage the family on my own. I earn Rs 400 a day. This is not enough to get the basic amenities for my family of four members. I have three children, and I was compelled to stop their education because of financial problems. I do not get regular work at construction sites now. Work opportunities in the sector are decreasing. I want to go back to Kharupetia, but it will not be possible because we have no home or property there,' Hanufa said.

'We are not treated as human beings but as labourers by our employers. We are not paid extra wages if we work more than 10 hours a day or till night. Our hard work has no value for the employers. I have seen that employers do not take the responsibility if a worker is injured



during working hours at the construction site. Two years ago, when one of our fellow workers was seriously injured at the construction site we collected money for him. He was not given a penny by the employer as compensation or for treatment,' said Basiran Necha. Basiran and her husband are construction workers. After losing their home and land in the floods, they migrated to the city from a char area of Mukalmuwa in Nalbari district. They started working as construction labourers in the city. But Basiran lost her husband two years after they came to the city, and she became the sole earner for her family of four children. She was not able to bring up her children properly. During work hours, she did not get time to breastfeed them, and they often cried with hunger. According to Basiran apart from the many other problems in this work, there is also scarcity and unavailability of work, and she wants to shift to other daily wage work.

Twenty-four-year old Samina Begum has been suffering from a skin disease for a long time. 'I have been working at construction sites for seven years, and the dusty atmosphere at the workplace worsened my health. I have become physically weak and suffer from acute skin diseases and other health problems. I do not have the money for better medical treatment. I took medicines from a government hospital, but could not continue as the medicines were not free. It is difficult to buy medicines when we have no work. My husband is also a construction worker. Both of us earn but construction work has been reducing for a few years now. So, we hardly get work, and it becomes very tough to arrange two meals a day for the family. I also face problems at the workplace regarding taking care of my child. When I was working, I would put my baby on a cloth at the construction site. Sometimes, my hungry baby cried, but I could not breastfeed him on time. Our employer or contractor did not allow any rest or break time for mothers to feed their babies. My son has been suffering from allergies and breathing problems because he stayed for a long time at the construction site,' Samina said.

Faziran Nesa, a 32-year-old worker migrated from Abhayapuri in Bongaion district seven years ago. She was separated from her

husband and came to Guwahati in search of work. Everything was fine earlier, but now earning a living has become very tough due to scarcity of work. 'I wait for work every morning, but it has become very hard to get work. I have been seeing this for a few years now. I have to find other work because of the insecurity of construction work. Besides, we are not paid extra wages for overtime work. There are other problems too at the construction sites which lack sanitation, drinking water, safety and security. I have been suffering from severe pain in my hands and feet due to carrying construction material for so many years. The contractors and employers do not think about our health and other problems. No leave or rest hour is available to us,' Faziran said.

Alekjan, aged 28 years migrated from Goalpara district to Guwahati with her husband; both construction workers. 'There were no earning options in our village. We migrated to the city to earn. At first, I was engaged in making *bidis*. But the daily wage was very low so I started working at construction sites with my husband. My daily wage is Rs 300-400. But for a few years, the work at construction sites has been reducing. Earlier we got work almost every day but now we get work for 10-12 days a month. Our only son is physically and mentally challenged. All our savings have been spent on his treatment but his condition has not improved. Now we are in financial distress. It has become impossible to stay in a costly city. We have decided to return to our native village,' Alekjan said.

After migrating from Moirabari in Morigaon district 17 years ago, 45-year-old Majida Begum started working as a construction worker in Guwahati. She lost her husband at a very young age, and she is the sole earner of her family. Majida has four children; two daughters are married and her two sons are studying in a government school. Said Majida, 'I am the only earner in my family. Earlier I was a housewife. But when my husband died, I was compelled to work to run my huge family and for educating my children. I was not aware of the world when I came to the city. I started staying at this residential campus where almost all the women are engaged in construction work. I tried to learn *dhalai* (casting concrete roofs, posts and slabs) work from

them. It was a challenging task for me, but gradually I learnt it because of my hard work. I was able to look after my family by working at construction sites. But it has been very tough to arrange our daily meals for 2-3 years now. Our work is decreasing as the contractors are using machines for construction work. Last year, I spent my savings marrying my daughters, and I also had to borrow some money at that time. Now I am finding it very difficult to repay the debt. I am searching for other daily wage work because it has become impossible to run my family by doing construction work where I hardly get work for 10 days a month. The rent is also a burden amidst all the other financial problems. I wish to return to our native village, but we have no land or property there. Our land was occupied by our relatives. So, I have to stay here and be insecure about work and shelter.'

Sabiran Begum, aged 32 years, migrated from Mukalmua in Nalbari district. Her husband came to Guwahati from Dhubri district. Sabiran carries concrete material at construction sites and earns Rs 300 a day. Her husband is a carpenter and his daily wage is Rs 500–700. Sabiran said, 'Physical work is required at construction sites. But the wage does not compensate for the hard labour. Moreover, though there are fixed work hours for labourers, we have to work till night and the overtime work is not paid for. Decreasing work opportunities in the construction sector as a result of the use of machines is now a threat to our lives. We are thinking of moving to our native place and finding a new livelihood source there. Apart from the low wages and job insecurity, there are other problems that women workers face. When my son was an infant, I carried him to my workplace. I kept him wrapped in a cloth at the construction site. He lay in the unhealthy environment for the whole day. I could not breastfeed him on time. Without proper nutrition during childhood, he is now physically weak. He also suffers from cough and breathing difficulties because he stayed in the dust at construction sites for several years.'

Forty-year-old Sukuri Bibi has been engaged in construction work for about 15 years. She migrated from Phulkatari char area in Dhubri district with her parents as their home and property were

submerged by floods. Sukuri Bibi earns Rs 350-450 as daily wage doing construction work. However, work in this sector is decreasing and the workers are facing severe work-related insecurities. Sukuri Bibi recently got work after 15 days. Every day she goes out in search of work but returns disappointed. She lost her husband four years ago and now she is the sole earner for her family. She has three children, and it becomes difficult for her to provide them the basic amenities. She is trying to find other work because it is impossible to live in the city with the reducing work in the construction sector. She has been suffering from skin allergy and acute stomach pain for several years for which she got treatment for a few days. But she is unable to buy medicines if she has no work. Then she has to bear the pain and cannot go looking for work. The doctors have informed her that her health issues are a result of working at construction sites for a long period.

'I am going through very miserable conditions. I was a helper at construction sites. I carried cement, sand and bricks and helped in mixing the concrete. Thanks to carrying the heavy weight, I have back pain and other diseases like allergy and breathing problems which have made me physically weak. I have no money for food or other basic needs; so how can I go for medical treatment? My physical condition is deteriorating. Construction work has been reducing for a few years, and the contractors do not want labourers who are physically weak. So, I am incapable of doing this work, and I cannot find other daily wage work. My husband is bedridden. If I find no work I will be compelled to start begging on the roads and footpaths to arrange two meals a day,' 60-year-old Meherjan Khatun said with tears in her eyes.

Amiran, aged 45 years, migrated from Chengripam char area in Barpeta district 20 years ago with her husband. They lost their shelter in the floods, and there were no livelihood opportunities in the village. After coming to Guwahati, Amiran started working as a construction labourer. Her husband died because of tuberculosis in 2015. His untimely death brought misfortunes to Amiran's life. She became the sole earner for her family. Now Amiran is physically very weak and is unable to work at construction sites. She has been suffering

from anaemia and chest and back pain due to carrying heavy loads of concrete material at construction sites for several years. Now she works as a domestic help in the house of her landlord. Working for a long period at construction sites deteriorated her health, and financial problems prevented her from getting medical treatment. Amiran has two sons who are studying in a government school. Struggling with severe financial difficulties, Amiran has been trying to continue their education so that they become self-dependent when they grow up.

‘My life is full of pain and misery. I am a single woman as my husband died in an accident and my only daughter got married. I am originally from Kharupetia in Darrang district. Our family was very poor and did not have any source of income available in our village. Our neighbours told me that there were a lot of opportunities for earning in Guwahati. So, after my parents’ death I came to the city in search of livelihood options. I worked as a labourer at different construction sites. Now I am unable to do that work as I have become physically very weak because a tumour was found in my stomach two years ago, and I had to undergo an operation at Guwahati Medical College Hospital. Hard work like carrying heavy loads as a construction labourer made me physically weak. Besides I also have breathing difficulties due to inhaling concrete dust at the sites. I am unable to do any work due to this. I have not found any way of earning except by begging,’ Hamida Bewa, aged 50 years, said.

Sixty-year-old Kabila Khatun came from a char area in Singimari in Dhubri district 20 years ago. Kabila said, ‘We lost our land and home in an erosion. My husband died because of illness. Being in distress I came to Guwahati in search of earning a living. I was engaged in construction work. I have been staying at this residential campus for 20 years. I have two children; my daughter is married, and I live with my son who works as a daily wage labourer. Decreasing work opportunities at construction sites have led to financial hardships for our family. It has become impossible to manage the family because of irregularity and uncertainty of work in this sector. The unimaginable hard labour that I did at construction sites has deteriorated my health,

and now I am incapable of doing as much physical work as I did earlier. Now I do some work which involves less physical labour like mixing and cleaning concrete mixture. Labourer requirement in construction work is reducing which results in poverty among these workers.'

Saleha Begum, aged 52 years, migrated from Damribasa char area in Chirang district 30 years ago. 'Our land and home were submerged in the river, and we became homeless. I came to Guwahati with my husband in search of work. We both started working as construction workers. At that time, we got work regularly, and our life was smooth. But after my husband's death 10 years ago, I became the sole earner for my family. Now I hardly get construction work, and in summer no work is available. Living in this costly city in a rented house becomes tough due to unavailability of work in the construction sector. We cannot return to our native village as we do not own any land there. The number of workers is increasing but there is not enough work in the construction sector. I think women workers suffer more because of unavailability of work as our work of carrying and mixing concrete mixture has been taken over by machines. I am searching for other daily wage work because it becomes very tough to manage with this uncertainty of work in the construction sector,' Saleha said.

Kodbhanu Banu, aged 35 years, was a construction worker till four years ago when her hand got injured after the branch of a tree fell on it. Now she is unable to do hard work and she cannot carry concrete load at construction sites. 'I migrated from Dhubri district in search of work as we were affected by the floods and erosion. I live a pathetic life with several problems. I lost my husband two years ago. I have four children, among them the younger son is physically very weak. But I do not have the money to get him treated. The other three have discontinued their studies because I could not pay for their education. After my hand got injured, I have not been able to work. The contractors at the construction sites do not want to employ me as I cannot carry the load. I tried to look for other daily wage work but found nothing so I started begging in the nearby areas. Some critical phases in life have led to my miserable condition.'

Amiran Bewa, aged 40 years, migrated from a char area in Kharupetia in Darrang district 15 years ago. 'I worked at construction sites in Guwahati. My husband was a TB patient for several years and was bedridden. So, I was the sole earner for our family. My husband died five years ago. I have four children and among them two daughters are married. I was unable to educate my sons due to financial difficulties. I have been suffering from body aches and anaemia because of working at construction sites for a long time. I could not get medical treatment because of financial problems. Now it has become very difficult to find work at construction sites as our work is being done by machines. I left the construction sector a year ago because there was no work and now I am working as a domestic help. We do not own any land in the village as we lost it in the floods and erosion. Hence, I have no option but to live in this city,' Amiran said.

Forty-year-old Firoja Khatun had this to say, 'I am originally from Kalkajari village in Morigaon district. I migrated to Guwahati 10 years ago in search of work as I lost my husband. I have been staying at this residential campus since then. With the help of my neighbours I started working at construction sites. I have no children but my mother who lives in the village is financially dependent on me. Construction work is not easy as it requires physical labour. Thanks to carrying heavy construction material for several years, I have become physically weak. It is very difficult to consult a doctor because that requires a lot of money. I have been having severe pain in my whole body for a long time. I have also been suffering from anaemia, gastroenteritis and reproductive difficulties. Moreover, we face problems regarding our payments. Sometimes, the contractors try to cheat us by not releasing our wages on time, and they misbehave with us when we ask for our money. We have to request them for our dues and we are not paid overtime. It is very tough to find work at construction sites now-a-days. The uncertainty and unavailability of work has a more serious impact on women than men, because machines are being used for carrying and mixing concrete material which was done by women

workers earlier. I hope the government gives us assistance so that we can pay for our basic needs.'

Amina Khatun, aged 30 years, worked as a construction worker for seven years before giving it up to take care of her 2-year-old son. 'I migrated from Borbala char in Mukalmua in Nalbari district after our home and land was destroyed in floods and erosion. Construction work requires a lot of physical labour and we had to carry heavy weights every day. We have not been trained to do any other work except carrying and mixing concrete material and hence our daily wage is less than what male workers earn. The hard labour led to body pain, headaches, gastroenteritis, anaemia and allergies. I do not want to work again at the construction sites. I will search for other alternative livelihood sources,' Amina said.

Interactions with these migrant women construction workers revealed many untold stories of their lives. Their problems and experiences which they shared unfolded in different areas related to their lives and work. These women construction workers migrated from other districts of Assam. Originally they come from riverine areas and belong to a minority community. They had to migrate because they lost their land and homes in the floods and erosion. They migrated in search of work and stay in rented houses in Guwahati. Construction work requires hard physical labour. Carrying heavy weights affected their general and reproductive health. Most of the women workers said that they suffered from body pain. Besides, they are physically weak and suffer from gastroenteritis and stomach pains because of irregular eating. They were also deprived of nutritious food during pregnancy which resulted in anaemia and malnutrition. Their average life span is short due to excessive hard work without proper nutritious food. As these women workers were unskilled, they were employed for carrying heavy loads of concrete material and preparing the concrete mixture. They were unable to upgrade their skills and become skilled labourers through training. Hence, their daily wages were lower than a skilled male worker's. Sometimes, the contractors misbehaved with them at the time of giving their dues.



If they had to work till night, they were not paid overtime. Moreover, the construction sites do not have proper sanitation facilities because of which women workers suffered the most. Lack of hygiene and sanitation affected their reproductive health especially those who were pregnant and during menstruation. Most of them suffer from allergies, skin problems, cough, gastroenteritis and body ache due to hard work and unhealthy conditions at the construction sites.

Their children were deprived of proper nourishment as they did not get a break or a leave to take care of them. Most of the women workers were illiterate and unaware of the registration process for construction workers. So, they were deprived of the welfare benefits that the government provides. One significant factor that was identified is that most of the women workers we interviewed were widows. They had to play a new role and handle responsibilities as sole bread earners for their families. The unavailability of work in the construction sector due to the use of machines has had a severe impact on women workers. Machines are now being used to carry and mix the concrete material which was done by women workers earlier. Decreasing work at construction sites and the uncertainty arising because of this left women workers jobless. This situation not only worsened their financial condition but also compelled some of them to adopt unfair means for earning. The jobless women workers also undergo trauma and depression as a result of uncertainty of work and an insecure life.

## **A PROFILE OF WOMEN CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN THE STUDY AREA**

Data on the socioeconomic status, living conditions, literacy rate, and number of children for the 30 women construction workers who form a part of this study are given in Figures 1-8.

BONYA BARUAH

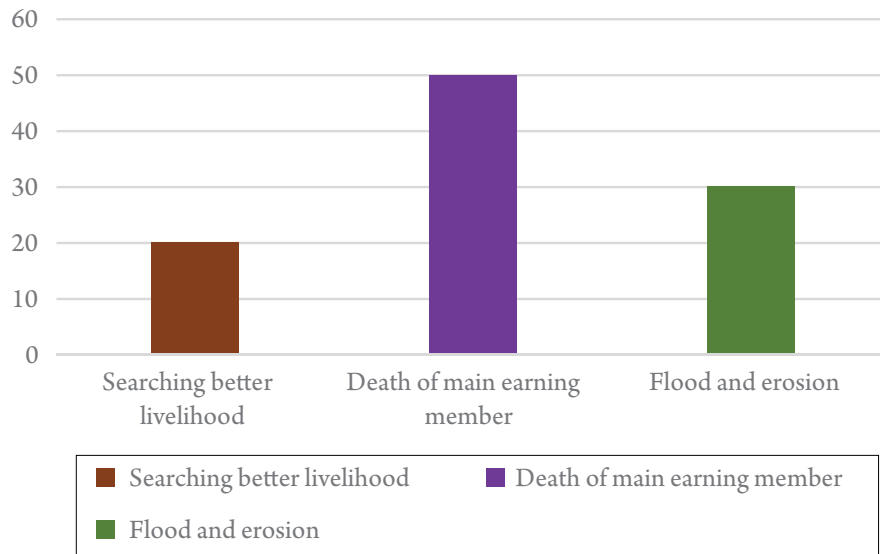


Figure 1: Reasons of migration among women construction workers (%)

Figure 1 gives the reasons for migrating which are divided into three categories: 20 per cent women migrated in search of better livelihood options, 30 per cent came after they became homeless due to floods and erosion; and 50 per cent migrated after the death of the main earning member of their family.

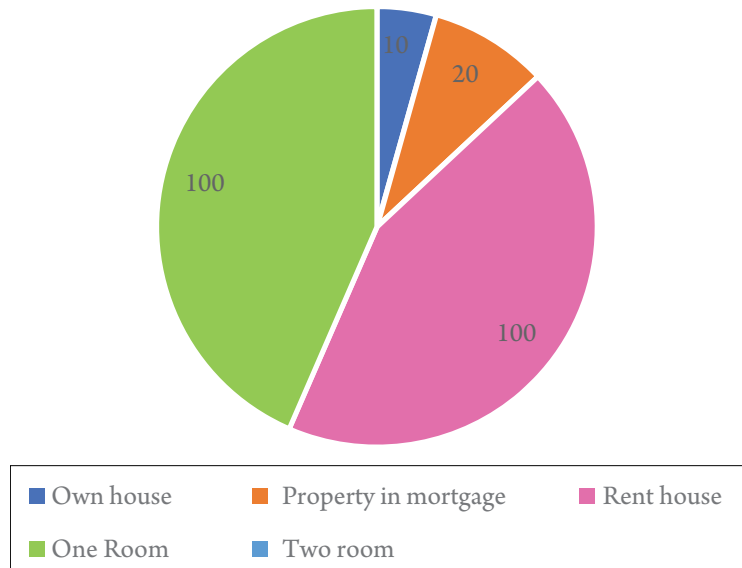


Figure 2: Living conditions of women construction workers (%)

Figure 2 gives the living conditions of the women workers. It shows that all the women workers lived in rented houses. Only 10 per cent had their own houses in their native places; 20 per cent of the women workers had mortgaged their property and all the women workers lived in one-room rented houses.

UNHEARD VOICES BEHIND THE CONCRETE WALLS

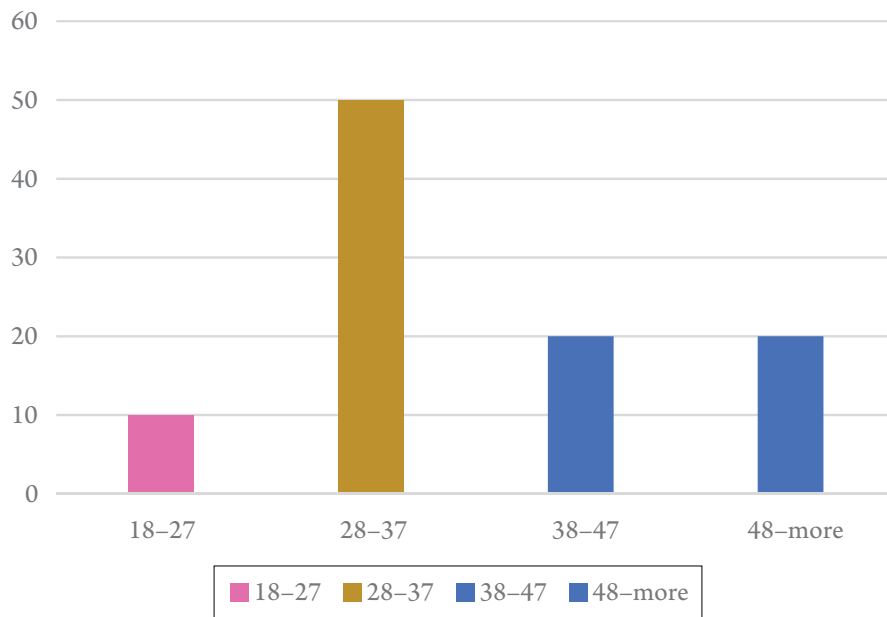


Figure 3: Ages of the women construction workers (%)

Figure 3 gives the ages of the women construction workers. It shows that 50 per cent of the women workers were in the age group of 28–37 years while 20 per cent women workers were in the 38–47 years age group and 10 per cent women were in the 18–27 years age group; 20 per cent women were 48 years or older.



Figure 4: Registration status of women construction workers (%)

Figure 4 gives the registration status of women construction workers. As can be seen in the figure, there were no registered women construction workers. All the women construction workers who participated in the study were unregistered workers and were not aware of the registration process.

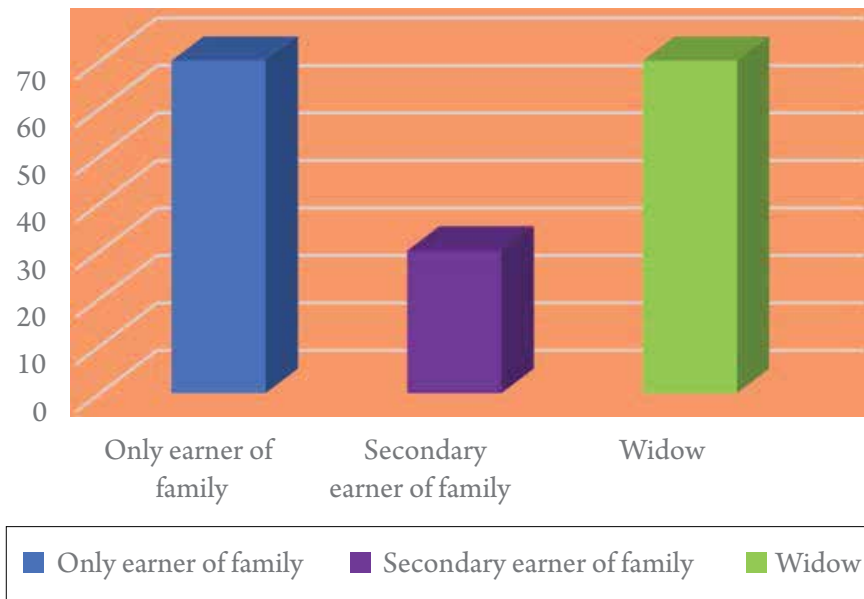


Figure 5: Economic status of women construction workers

Figure 5 shows that 70 per cent of the women workers were the sole earning member for their families and 30 per cent women were secondary earning members.

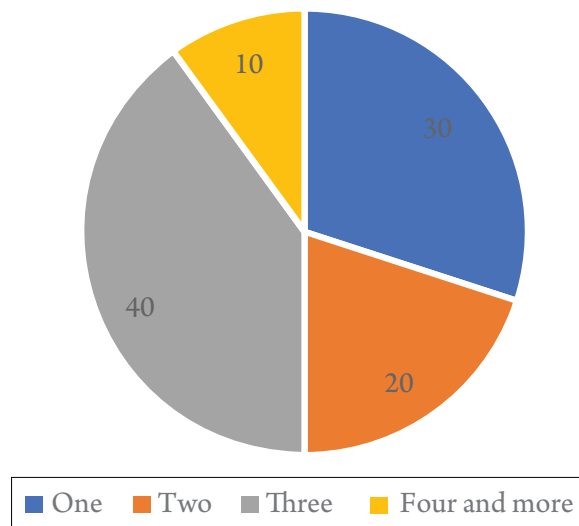


Figure 6: Number of Children of Women Construction Workers (%)

Figure 6 shows the number of children that the women construction workers had: 40 per cent had three children, 20 per cent had two children, 30 per cent had one child and 10 per cent had four or more children.

UNHEARD VOICES BEHIND THE CONCRETE WALLS

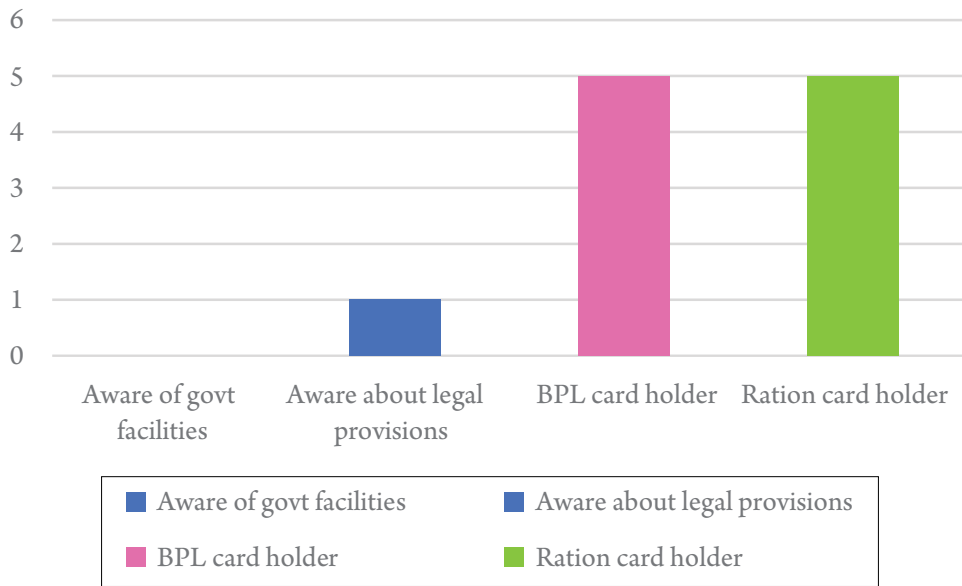


Figure 7: Status of government facilities for women construction workers (%)

Figure 7 gives the status of government facilities for women construction workers.

The figure shows that no women worker was aware of government facilities.

Only 1 per cent of the women workers knew about the legal provisions related to construction workers while 5 per cent had BPL cards and 5 per cent had ration cards.

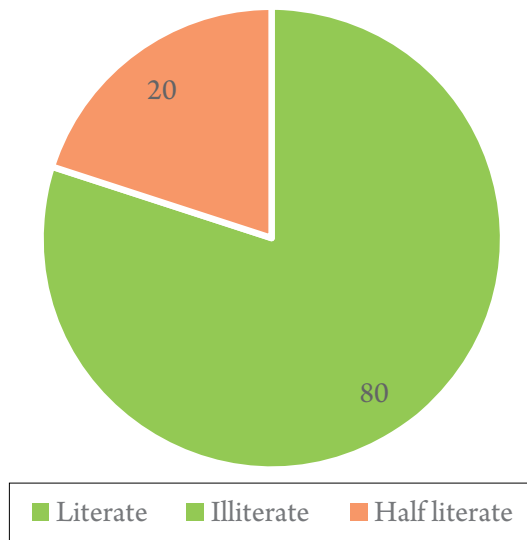


Figure 8: Literacy levels of women construction workers (%)

Figure 8 gives the literacy levels of women construction workers. It shows that 80 per cent of the women workers were illiterate, 20 per cent were half literate and there were no literate women workers among those who took part in the study.

## **LEGAL PROVISIONS AND SOCIAL SECURITY**

There are several acts for construction labourers such as the Contractual Labour Act, the Minimum Wage Act, the Equal Wage Act, and the Inter-state Migrant Labourer Act. But the construction workers are exploited and deprived of their basic rights due to lack of proper implementation of these acts. The Government of India formulated the Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act in 1996. According to the regulations of this act, all the construction workers should be provided a proper and improved living atmosphere, safety and health and welfare facilities. But these regulations have only remained an act which has not been implemented. In Assam, several welfare schemes for workers have been announced by the state government: the Assam Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Board under the Labour and Welfare Ministry of the Assam government offers several welfare facilities for construction workers. For example, in case of the death of a construction worker at the workplace, his family is entitled to Rs 3,00,000 as a one-time grant and Rs 50,000 in case of a general death. Women construction workers get a one-time grant of Rs 20,000 at the time of child birth for a maximum of two children. Construction workers are offered Rs 1,50,000 for treatment of critical diseases and Rs 5,000 annually for health check-ups. Besides, Rs 2,000 per month is given as pension to workers above 60 years of age. The Welfare Board also offers financial assistance for the education of construction workers' children from school to the post-graduate level. Most of the construction workers were not aware of these welfare schemes available to them. They are deprived of these welfare facilities because they are not registered as construction workers.

## OVERVIEW

Several perspectives and noticeable aspects were found after in-depth interviews and observation of the lives of women migrant construction workers in the Hatigaon area in Guwahati in Assam. The perspectives discussed now are not only limited to the women covered in the study but also relate to all female construction workers in a global context.

Use of machines: Rapid advancements in technology have touched almost all aspects related to human beings. The impact of technological advancements is also visible in the construction sector. Technological innovations and additions in the construction sector challenge the future of the workers involved in the sector. The technologies used in construction work make the work easier for the companies but several workers face work insecurities. Some technological advancements in the construction sector are concrete mixers for mixing sand and cement and concrete lifting machines to lift the mixer from the ground. These machines have been in use for 3-4 years. The use of these machines has reduced the requirement for human resources. The number of workers in the sector has increased, but availability of work is decreasing. Work which needed 10-15 workers earlier can now be completed with only five workers. 'I have been witnessing the lives of these construction workers for several years. Most of the workers are not registered. Hence, they do not get anything from the welfare schemes launched by the Labour Ministry. Machines have been in use in the construction industry for 3-4 years which has reduced the need for more workers. Earlier, 15-20 labourers were required to carry the concrete mixture. But now this can be done by lifting machines making it tough for a construction worker to get work. Those who worked five days a week now hardly get work for 10 days in a month. Job and life security is threatened by the use of technology,' said Najrul Islam, a businessman and owner of a residential campus inhabited by construction workers in Sijubari area in Hatigaon in Guwahati.

This study also shows that since the construction workers are not getting sufficient work, most of them want to return to their

native places. The construction industry has benefitted from the use of technology as the machines make the work faster and easier. But this has also led to poverty and insecure futures for the construction workers.

**Health issues:** Women construction workers often suffer from various diseases due to unhealthy work and living conditions. Almost all the women interviewees talked about their health problems. Presence of hazardous chemicals at the construction sites, scarcity of potable water, eating at irregular intervals and lack of sanitation are some reasons for their frequent illnesses. Women construction workers generally suffer from allergies, cough, breathing problems, skin diseases and stomach infections. Most of them do not have the money for treatment because of financial difficulties. Women construction workers also face problems because there are no toilets at their workplace. So, they can suffer from reproductive and other infections without proper hygiene and sanitation. Pregnant women workers and those who are menstruating face more difficulties at the workplace. They do not get any leave during pregnancy and other illnesses. They have to work for long hours without nutritious food, rest and medication. Some of them are malnourished and anaemic which harms the new-borns. Moreover, women construction workers are engaged in carrying construction material. Carrying more weight than they are physically capable of may have adverse effects on their health. Hard work at the construction sites for long periods, lack of enough nutrition, an unhealthy work environment and living conditions and lack of sanitation and hygiene result in frequent illnesses and diseases among the women construction workers which leads to shorter life spans.

**Nurturing their children:** One of the noticeable problems faced by women construction workers is nurturing their children. Almost all the women workers shared their bitter experiences regarding taking care of their children. The construction sites do not have any creche facilities. Women workers have to carry their children to their workplaces as they do not get child care or maternity leave. When



women workers get work, they have to take it; otherwise they face financial problems. Women workers do their work even with their breastfeeding babies either carrying them on their backs or putting the babies at the work sites. The mothers do not get a break during work hours to feed their children. They cannot breastfeed their babies on time. So, their children suffer from malnutrition, low immunity and other health problems. Women workers are not aware of regular immunization for new born babies. Infants can be seen lying on the floor and children playing at construction sites till their mothers' work is finished. The infants and children can suffer from breathing difficulties, colds, coughs, allergies, fever and skin diseases by inhaling cement, dust particles and paint fumes. Their growth can be retarded as they do not get nutritious food. Moreover, the children are prone to accidents when playing and staying near risky material and machines at the construction sites.

**Safety and security:** Lack of safety and social security of the construction workers is a serious concern. Sometimes, women construction workers may be victims of sexual abuse or harassment by their contractors or employers. As they are unorganized workers, there is no provision for them to complain against the perpetrators. Moreover, some contractors or sub-contractors pay half their total dues and do not give them the remaining money. In such cases, the workers are left helpless as there is no systematic procedure for payments in this unorganized work. Sometimes, the workers do not even know their sub-contractors which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation.

Construction workers are deprived of social security measures as they are unorganized workers. Migrant construction workers are not able to avail the benefits of a BPL card, ration card and other government facilities because they have migrated from other districts or states. Besides, lack of awareness deprives them of different social security and welfare schemes provided by the government. These facilities are provided for registered construction workers. But almost all the construction workers in Guwahati are unaware of the fact that

there is a process of registration for them which will enable them to avail the benefits of welfare schemes. Moreover, there are no safety measures or first aid for construction workers at the workplace. If any worker is injured at the construction site, he/she does not get financial assistance from the employer. A severe injury may lead to permanent physical disabilities and result in the entire family becoming poor. Though, under the Labour Ministry of Assam, there are financial grants for workers who are injured at the construction sites, the workers do not get these benefits without registration.

**Gender discrimination:** Women workers in the construction sector experience gender discrimination related to division of work and wages. Women construction workers are considered unskilled labourers. So, their wages are less than their fellow male workers' who are skilled labourers. According to the women participants in this study, sometimes they are paid Rs 300 a day when their fellow male workers are paid Rs 400. Women workers are employed to carry cement, bricks and other construction material, preparing the concrete mix, supplying water and cleaning the construction sites. They are not given any training for the other work performed by the male workers and not encouraged to acquire some skills. None of them get an opportunity to learn new skills. Women workers remain unskilled workers who are paid low wages as compared to skilled male workers. Generally, their working hours are 8 am to 5 pm. But these working hours are not followed by the contractors or employers. Sometimes, women workers have to work from morning to midnight, and they are not paid overtime wages. Women workers' safety and security at the workplace is not given importance by their employers. Their human rights are also violated in some situations. Society's patriarchal attitude is also reflected in the construction industry in the division of work and discrimination in wages against the women workers.

**Living conditions:** Migrant construction workers have to arrange shelter at the new place where they have migrated. The women interviewees did not own a home or land in their native places. Most of them lived in the char areas affected by floods and erosion forcing

them to migrate to urban areas and stay in rented houses; they are unable to go back to their native places. Migrant construction workers belonging to the Muslim community in Guwahati live in shanties in different compounds in the Hatigaon area. The women construction workers interviewed for the study lived in *kuccha* or semi-*pucca* one-room rented houses. Most of them have large families with four to six members or more living in one room. Their low wages mean that they cannot afford better accommodation. In such an over-crowded environment, it is not possible for their children to get proper space for studying. Some women workers face problems of drinking water and toilet facilities as adequate facilities are not available in their residential campuses. Most of them lost their land and homes due to floods and erosion. And now that there is scarcity of work in the construction sector, the workers want to go back to their native places but this is not possible as they do not have their old homes and property. As employment in the construction sector is reducing, it has become difficult for construction workers to stay in rented houses in a city where the cost of living is high.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Insecurity about employment, lower wages, increasing numbers of unemployed labourers due to use of machines, no proper implementation of labour laws and no provisions of minimum facilities for the workers at the workplace are some significant problems faced by construction as well as unorganized workers. Hence, the Government of Assam should implement the labour acts to fulfil the needs of unorganized workers along with providing them employment and job security. The rights of migrant workers should be protected. The government should help women construction workers by providing them training so that they can become skilled workers. The legal rights of women workers should not be violated by treating

them as unskilled workers and the concerned authorities should deal with this issue. Concerned authorities should monitor the wage system for construction workers. The authorities should also ensure the provision of safety systems at construction sites and compensation for workers who are injured at the workplace.

The government and concerned authorities should take necessary steps for upgrading the women construction workers' skills through training, provision of proper drinking water, sanitation and crèche facilities for their children, giving them time to breastfeed their children, safety and security at the workplace and provision of maternity leave. They should be registered as construction workers so that they can get the benefits provided to them. It is the responsibility of the Labour Welfare Department to monitor the contractors and employers and to arrange safety measures at the construction sites. The authorities should investigate the problems faced by women construction workers and take necessary steps to improve their conditions. Reduction of work in the construction sector may force migrant women workers to adopt unfair means for earning a living. It is the government's responsibility to arrange alternative means of livelihood for these women workers. The democratic values of the largest democracy will be maintained when the rights and dignity of life of the construction workers are assured.

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