

A Study on the Impact of Gender Norms and Unpaid Care Work on Women Construction Workers

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Abstract

This descriptive study examines the convergence of gender norms and unpaid care work in influencing the labor participation, vulnerabilities, and lived experiences of women construction workers within India's informal sector. The study investigates the ways in which socio-cultural expectations regarding caregiving, mobility, and work roles impede women's access to secure employment, skill enhancement, and leadership possibilities. Time-use patterns show that women have a constant double burden: they conduct physically hard paid work while also taking care of unpaid home duties that aren't visible. The lack of institutional support, such as daycare centers, flexible work hours, and help with caring for the elderly, makes their financial and emotional problems much worse. The report ultimately advocates for a reassessment of care work and a reconfiguration of labor institutions to align with the experiences of women on the periphery of India's growth narrative.

Keywords: *Gender norms, Unpaid care work, Women workers, Construction workers, Gender inequality, Work-life balance, Labor participation, Women in construction, Gender roles, Employment barriers*

1. INTRODUCTION

Women make up approximately 11% of the total construction workforce in India, with an even smaller presence in metropolitan areas at only 7%. Their participation is influenced not simply by economic necessity, but also by long-standing gender conventions that limit mobility, skill acquisition, and access to formal employment. Most women enter the industry through informal channels, working as stone breakers, sand sifters, or manual carriers' roles

that require little expertise but a lot of physical effort. These jobs are often unregulated, low-wage, and lack social protections. Aside from economic exploitation, women construction workers suffer other structural impediments, including inadequate access to sanitation, a lack of childcare facilities, and increased exposure to harassment and gender-based violence. These obstacles are exacerbated by their unpaid caregiving responsibilities at home, which limit their capacity to work full-time or pursue better

possibilities (Bhattacharjee et al., 2025). Women's labor is both important and underestimated, with their presence obvious on building sites but unseen in policy discourse. The continuance of unpaid care work as a gendered role is strongly ingrained in Indian sociocultural norms (Kapoor, 2025). Patriarchal ideologies view caregiving and domestic tasks as a "natural" extension of women's identities, perpetuating the belief that nurturing is an inherent female trait. These standards are reinforced by family structures, religious beliefs, media representations, and school curricula, which frequently laud selfless female while forbidding men from doing domestic work. Furthermore, gender norms combine with caste, class, and marital status to create multifaceted vulnerabilities.

Dalit and Adivasi women, for example, are subjected to prejudice and exploitation in paid labor contexts in addition to unpaid care duties. Married women are frequently expected to care for both their natal and marital homes, whereas single or widowed

women may be ostracized for working outside the home. These norms impact labor participation patterns, limit mobility, and maintain occupational segregation, especially in informal sectors such as construction, where women are restricted to low-skilled, low-paying jobs despite their contributions. The goal of this research is to describe how ingrained gender norms and the burden of unpaid care work impact the lives of women construction workers in India. By investigating the intersection of socio-cultural expectations and informal labor dynamics, the paper hopes to shed light on how caregiving responsibilities, which are frequently invisible and undervalued, limit women's mobility, limit their access to stable employment, and exacerbate their economic and social vulnerability. Using this viewpoint, the research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how care work and cultural norms impact labor participation and sustain structural marginalization in the informal sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In India, gender norms are strongly rooted in religious, cultural, and familial structures. These norms shape what people are expected to do based on how they see their gender roles. This includes caring for children and the elderly, cooking, cleaning, and emotional work, all of which are unpaid and not really seen in economic accounts. Generational socialization, media portrayals, and institutional practices that value women's selflessness and discourage men from being involved in home life all support these expectations (Meyers, 2002). Mobility is another area where gender norms have a big impact. In a lot of parts of India, especially rural and semi-urban areas, family and group norms make it hard for women to go outside the home. Women often don't travel alone, work far from home, or go out in public because they are afraid for their safety, respect, and sense of right and wrong (Vera-Gray, 2018). These restrictions make it harder for

women to get an education, improve their skills, and find work. This is especially true in fields like building where women often have to work at remote or male-dominated sites. Women are expected to work for money and then go home and care for others, which is called a "double shift" and takes a lot of their time, energy, and health (Schuldt, 2011). Gender norms in the labor market are evident in occupational segregation and wage disparities. Women frequently occupy low-skilled, low-paying positions that reflect their domestic responsibilities, such as cleaning, food preparation, or manual labor in construction, whereas men predominantly hold supervisory or technical roles (Hegewisch & Hartmann, 2014). The informal sector, which employs the majority of women construction workers, is characterized by insufficient regulatory oversight, rendering these workers susceptible to exploitation, harassment, and wage theft.

Unpaid care work includes various activities that support households and communities, yet it is often economically unrecognized. Domestic tasks encompass cooking, cleaning, laundry, and fetching water; direct caregiving involves caring for children, the elderly, and the sick; and emotional labor includes providing psychological support, managing family dynamics, and maintaining social cohesion (Hess et al., 2017). Feminist economists have consistently contested this omission. Margaret Reid's "third-party criterion" asserts that any activity eligible for paid outsourcing, including childcare or eldercare, must be regarded as work, irrespective of the individual executing it (Zagheni et al., 2014). Nancy Folbre differentiates between direct care work, which involves intimate and personal caregiving, and indirect care work, encompassing tasks such as cooking or cleaning that assist dependents. She also introduces the concept of supervisory care, characterized by passive oversight of dependents while engaging in multitasking activities. These typologies elucidate the

complexities of care work, including its emotional, physical, and temporal demands (Wiltshire, 2024). The 2019–20 Time Use Survey in India indicated that women engage in unpaid care work for nearly ten times the hours compared to men, representing the most significant gender gap among OECD countries. This imbalance is not solely statistical; it indicates a profound gendered division of labor that constrains women's autonomy, economic participation, and overall well-being (Chakraborty & Sutradhar, 2023). Unpaid care work significantly influences the development of human capital. Women in lower-income households disproportionately shoulder the burden of care, dedicating considerably more time to caregiving compared to their wealthier counterparts (Tripathi et al., 2022). For women construction workers, unpaid care work represents a "second shift" that commences before dawn and persists after their physically demanding day at the construction site. These women frequently rise early to engage in cooking, cleaning, and preparing children for school prior to their work commitments, subsequently returning home to continue caregiving responsibilities (Sheikh et al., 2023). The lack of institutional support, including crèches, eldercare facilities, and flexible work arrangements, results in individuals' labor being dispersed across various domains with minimal respite or acknowledgment. Emotional labor represents an unspoken challenge, involving the management of familial tensions, the protection of children from adversity, and the navigation of social stigma linked to employment in male-dominated environments. Intersectionality, as introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a framework for analyzing the interplay of various social identities such as gender, caste, class, and marital status and how these interactions contribute to complex and heightened discrimination (Crenshaw, K. W., 2013). This framework assumes unique characteristics within the Indian context,

influenced by the entrenched caste system, economic hierarchies, and patriarchal social structures.

Caste continues to be a significant factor in the social stratification of India. Dalit and Adivasi women experience marginalization not only due to their gender in a patriarchal society but also as individuals belonging to castes that have historically faced exclusion, violence, and economic deprivation (Mandal, 2024).

Caste-based occupational segregation is infrequently recognized in labor policy, yet it significantly influences the daily experiences and vulnerabilities of women workers.

Marital status adds an additional layer of complexity. Married women are generally anticipated to prioritize domestic responsibilities, encompassing childcare, care for in-laws, and support for husbands, irrespective of their employment status. This dual burden limits their capacity to engage in full-time employment or pursue higher-paying job opportunities.

Widowed or single women may encounter social stigma and increased vulnerability on construction sites, where the lack of male "protection" is frequently perceived as a moral risk. Intersectionality demonstrates that the experiences of women construction workers cannot be comprehensively understood through a singular perspective of gender. Overlapping structures of caste, class, and marital status shape their realities, interacting to create distinct forms of marginalization.

3. OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The study is guided by the following objectives-

- a. To conduct a literature review to understand the current situation of gender norms and unpaid care work.
- b. To understand the impact of Gender Norms and Unpaid Care Work on the lives of women construction workers.
- c. To study the laws pertaining to the topic of study and understand the contribution of Panchayati Raj Institutions and Mahila Sabhas.

d. Suggest few policy implications in an attempt to improve the experiences of women construction workers.

4. IMPACT OF GENDER NORMS AND BURDEN OF UNPAID CARE WORK

- i. **Mobility and Job Choice-** In India, gender norms significantly impact women's mobility and occupational choices, determining both their permissible locations and the types of work considered "appropriate" for them. The norms are founded on patriarchal expectations that emphasize women's roles as caregivers and homemakers, thereby reinforcing the notion that their primary domain is the private sphere. Consequently, numerous women, particularly in rural and semi-urban regions, encounter social scrutiny or explicit limitations when pursuing employment beyond the home. Safety concerns, family honor, and moral propriety often restrict their capacity to travel independently, engage in male-dominated workplaces, or accept positions that involve physical labor or extended hours. Women construction workers face restricted access to worksites, limited opportunities for migration, and exclusion from higher-paying or skilled positions that require mobility and visibility.
- ii. **Social Stigma Around Women in Construction-** In India, the construction sector is commonly viewed as a male-dominated field characterized by physical demands, public visibility, and associations with rough, transient labor. Gender norms, entrenched in patriarchal expectations, position women as nurturers limited to the private sphere, tasked with caregiving and domestic responsibilities. The entry of women into construction work challenges established norms, resulting in social stigma that calls into question their morality, femininity, and familial honor. The stigma is especially

pronounced in rural and semi-urban areas, where community oversight and cultural conservatism strengthen strict delineations regarding "respectable" female employment (Dubey & Pattanayak, 2025). The stigma is exacerbated by the visibility of construction work; women are observed lifting heavy materials, collaborating with men, and dedicating extended hours away from home, all of which challenge traditional notions of modesty and submissiveness. Social disapproval frequently results in internalized guilt, withdrawal from professional responsibilities, or the acceptance of exploitative conditions to preserve a facade of respectability. Additionally, families may dissuade women from pursuing careers in construction due to concerns about potential reputational harm or marital instability. The stigma faced by single, widowed, or separated women is particularly severe, as their presence in the workplace is often perceived with suspicion and a sense of vulnerability.

- iii. **Limited Access to Skill Training or Leadership Roles-** In India, gender norms significantly influence women's access to skill development and leadership opportunities, especially within informal labor sectors like construction. In numerous communities, it is deemed inappropriate or unnecessary for women, particularly those from marginalized castes or low-income households, to engage in vocational training or seek supervisory positions (Adams et al., 2013). Consequently, women in construction often engage in low-skilled, repetitive tasks, such as material transport and debris removal, whereas men predominantly occupy positions necessitating technical expertise, decision-making, or site management (Galea et al., 2020). Lack of access to skill training confines women to low-wage positions with minimal opportunities for advancement. In the

absence of leadership opportunities, their perspectives are marginalized in decision-making processes related to workplace safety, wage negotiations, and labor rights. The situation for women construction workers signifies both economic stagnation and persistent invisibility within a sector that significantly depends on their labor.

iv. Time-Use Patterns and the Dual Shift-

The obligation of unpaid care work for women in construction extends beyond their on-site hours, commencing before dawn and persisting well after their compensated labor concludes. Data from India's 2019 National Time Use Survey indicates that women dedicate approximately eight to ten times more hours to unpaid care work compared to men, irrespective of their education, income, or employment status. Women engaged in informal labor experience a continuous "dual shift," beginning their day at dawn with domestic responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water, and preparing children for school, followed by physically demanding work at construction sites, and subsequently returning home to fulfill caregiving obligations (Chant & Pedwell, 2008). Early morning and late evening chores are not optional; they are socially mandated, deeply gendered, and frequently overlooked in economic discussions. This form of poverty restricts women's opportunities for rest, skill enhancement, and civic engagement.

v. Impact on Physical Health, Mental Well-Being, and Employment Stability-

The persistent demands of unpaid care work significantly affect the physical and mental health of women in construction, frequently compromising their capacity to maintain paid employment in the long term. These women generally start their day with intensive domestic tasks like cooking, cleaning, and caregiving before

proceeding to physically demanding construction sites, and subsequently returning home to continue caregiving responsibilities late into the evening. The continuous cycle of labor, characterized by minimal rest or recovery, results in chronic fatigue, musculoskeletal strain, and increased susceptibility to illness. The lack of labor-saving infrastructure, including piped water, cooking gas, and childcare support, exacerbates the physical burden, particularly for women from low-income and marginalized caste backgrounds. The consequences for mental health are similarly significant. The emotional labor involved in caregiving, which includes managing family tensions, protecting children from adversity, and sustaining household harmony, frequently remains unrecognized; however, it significantly contributes to stress, anxiety, and burnout.

vi. Absence of Institutional Support-

The lack of institutional support systems, including crèches, flexible work arrangements, and eldercare provisions, significantly increases the burden of unpaid care work for women construction workers, resulting in a cycle of exhaustion, economic vulnerability, and social invisibility. Construction sites infrequently offer childcare services, compelling mothers to leave young children unsupervised, depend on older siblings, or abandon paid employment entirely (Bridges et al., 2020). Flexible work hours, a crucial accommodation for caregivers, are largely absent in informal labor environments. Construction work is strictly scheduled, physically demanding, and frequently imposes penalties for tardiness or early departures, thereby limiting opportunities for women to address caregiving emergencies or eldercare responsibilities. This rigidity compels numerous individuals to exit the workforce or endure exploitative conditions merely to maintain

employment. Eldercare continues to be an overlooked area within India's labor policy. The aging population and declining family sizes have resulted in women assuming greater responsibility for elderly relatives, frequently in the absence of community-based care or financial assistance. The absence of institutional support for women construction workers results in caregiving hours translating into lost opportunities for paid labor, rest, or personal development. This leads to a persistent underappreciation of their contributions, both domestically and professionally.

5. CURRENT PROGRAMS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR FEMALE CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

i. **Maternity Benefit Act, 1961**

The Maternity Benefit Act was established to govern the employment of women in specific establishments surrounding childbirth and to ensure maternity benefits, which encompass paid leave, nursing breaks, and safeguards against dismissal during pregnancy. The policy stipulates a maximum of 26 weeks of paid maternity leave for qualifying women, in addition to provisions for a medical bonus and crèche facilities in organizations with over 50 employees. The Act's applicability is primarily confined to the formal sector, excluding a significant number of women working in informal environments such as construction. Due to the absence of formal contracts or registration among the majority of women construction workers, they are excluded from these protections.

ii. **Building and Other Construction Workers Act, 1996**

This Act was formulated to govern employment and enhance the working conditions of construction workers. The framework facilitates the registration of workers, the formation of State Welfare Boards, and access to benefits including

healthcare, accident insurance, pensions, housing assistance, and educational support for children. The provisions for crèches, drinking water, first aid, and sanitation facilities at construction sites are essential for women workers, who frequently bring children to work due to insufficient childcare options. Although the intent is progressive, the implementation is notably weak. A significant number of female workers lack awareness of the Act or encounter bureaucratic obstacles in the registration process as beneficiaries.

iii. **The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976-**

The Equal Remuneration Act requires employers to provide equal pay to men and women for identical work or work of comparable nature. It prohibits discrimination in recruitment, promotions, and training opportunities on the basis of gender. This Act serves as a fundamental measure for achieving wage parity in industries such as construction, where women frequently undertake the same tasks such as carrying bricks or mixing cement yet are compensated at substantially lower rates than their male counterparts.

iv. **The Code on Wages, 2019-**

This consolidated labor code supersedes multiple previous laws, such as the Payment of Wages Act and the Minimum Wages Act, with the objective of streamlining wage regulation across various sectors. The principle of equal pay for equal work is reinforced, and provisions for timely payment, minimum wage guarantees, and digitized wage records are introduced. Informal workers frequently do not have access to grievance redressal mechanisms, and wage theft is prevalent. Digital wage tracking and mandatory reporting by contractors may improve enforcement; however, awareness and registration continue to pose significant challenges.

v. **The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020-**

This Code integrates 13 pre-existing labor laws concerning health, safety, and working conditions. The regulations encompass requirements for sanitation, drinking water, restrooms, and crèches in workplaces with over 50 employees. It mandates safe working environments and protective equipment, which is essential for women in construction who frequently operate in hazardous conditions without fundamental safety gear. The Code's progressive language is contingent upon effective enforcement and the inclusion of women construction workers.

6. ROLE OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS AND MAHILA SABHAS

The role of Panchayati Raj Institutions and Mahila Sabhas in advocacy is significant. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are fundamental to decentralized governance in India, providing a framework for participatory decision-making at the village level. Women construction workers, frequently overlooked in policy discussions, can utilize PRIs as essential tools for advocacy, rights awareness, and local accountability. PRIs, via Gram Sabhas and sectoral committees, possess the authority to impact labor conditions, access to welfare schemes, and the incorporation of gender-sensitive provisions in village development plans. The effectiveness of this advocacy is contingent upon the meaningful participation of women, particularly those from marginalized castes and informal labor backgrounds.

Mahila Sabhas, which are women-only assemblies integrated into the Gram Panchayat planning process, serve a crucial function. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj and UNICEF guidelines stipulate that Mahila Sabhas are established to ensure the inclusion of women's voices prior to the convening of Gram Sabhas. These forums enable women to express their specific needs, including crèche facilities near construction sites, access to sanitation, wage

parity, and protection from workplace harassment, without the risk of interruption or dismissal. Mahila Sabhas contribute to the Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GDPDs) by institutionalizing gender-responsive planning and ensuring that care work and informal labor receive appropriate attention. Additionally, Mahila Sabhas function as venues for collective bargaining and the advancement of leadership skills. Women construction workers, frequently facing isolation and excessive workloads, can utilize these spaces to foster solidarity, articulate grievances, and elect representatives to advocate for their interests. Case studies such as that of Smt. Mamta Devi, a Dalit woman Pradhan from Himachal Pradesh, demonstrate the capacity of women leaders within PRIs to confront patriarchal norms and promote inclusive development agendas. The success in mobilizing employment schemes, improving infrastructure, and enhancing women's participation highlights the potential of PRIs when women are empowered to lead. PRIs and Mahila Sabhas serve as democratic instruments for achieving gender justice, transcending their roles as mere administrative structures. When effectively mobilized, they can connect policy with lived experience, ensuring that the voices of women construction workers are both acknowledged and addressed. Enhancing these institutions via capacity building, legal literacy, and intersectional representation is essential for converting advocacy into measurable change.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are a few practical recommendations-

a. Community Childcare Services-

Community childcare located near construction sites serves as an essential intervention for supporting women construction workers, who frequently balance physically demanding labor with significant caregiving responsibilities. Although the Building and Other Construction Workers Act (1996) stipulates the requirement for crèche facilities at construction sites with more than

50 workers, enforcement is often inadequate and inconsistent. For childcare to be genuinely accessible, it should be established as a mandatory criterion for construction permits, accompanied by third-party audits and contractor accountability.

b. Gender Sensitive Labour Policies- To tackle the dual burden of paid labor and unpaid care work, gender-sensitive labor policies should transcend mere token inclusion and actively reform workplace norms, infrastructure, and entitlements. Social protection schemes ought to incorporate caregiving status as a criterion for eligibility, thereby ensuring that women who decrease paid hours due to caregiving responsibilities are not disadvantaged. Training programs should be restructured to support caregivers by providing modular formats and community-based delivery methods. Recognizing the dual burden in labor policy is crucial for equity, workforce retention for women, productivity enhancement, and the promotion of inclusive development.

c. Awareness Campaigns- Awareness campaigns are essential in challenging and transforming the entrenched cultural perceptions that render unpaid care work invisible and undervalued. In India, caregiving is frequently perceived as an inherent aspect of womanhood, rather than as a labor category, resulting in its omission from economic discussions and policy considerations. Campaigns should be designed to emphasize care work as a fundamental economic and social contribution.

8. Conclusion

The experiences of women construction workers in India illustrate a significant disparity between the labor they undertake and the acknowledgment they obtain, both economically and within social discussions. Unpaid care work is crucial for the operation of households and the wider economy; however, it is consistently undervalued, overlooked, and omitted from policy

considerations. This invisibility is not coincidental; it is maintained by restrictive gender norms that characterize caregiving as an inherent female obligation rather than a legitimate form of labor. These norms influence women's time-use patterns and emotional burdens while also constraining their mobility, employment options, access to skill training, and leadership opportunities. Revaluing care work necessitates a cultural and institutional transformation that recognizes its economic significance, reallocates its responsibilities, and integrates it into labor and welfare policies.

The dismantling of gendered hierarchies that govern informal labor is equally urgent. Women construction workers navigate the complexities of caste, class, and gender, encountering multiple vulnerabilities that mainstream labor frameworks often overlook. Inclusive labor policies should acknowledge the lived experiences of individuals by recognizing the dual burden of paid and unpaid work, ensuring access to childcare and eldercare, enforcing wage parity, and establishing safe, flexible, and dignified work environments. Panchayati Raj Institutions and Mahila Sabhas provide valuable platforms for grassroots advocacy; however, their effectiveness relies on institutional commitment and the implementation of gender-sensitive planning. Transforming the landscape of informal labor necessitates more than reform; it requires a rethinking of value, visibility, and voice.

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