

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF
CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN
DELHI- A STUDY

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BACKGROUND OF SEWA'S WORK WITH CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN INDIA

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has played a pioneering role in organizing women in the informal sector. SEWA is a trade union registered in 1972 and has been organizing and providing services to the women in the informal economy. Over 700,000 women from nine states are SEWA members and this fact highlights the large member base of SEWA. SEWA's main goals are to organize these women workers for full employment and self-reliance, through the strategy of struggle and development.

The construction industry is a major employer of workers in India, second only to agriculture for male workers and bidi rolling for female workers. In 2000, there were an estimated 30 million construction workers in India of which half of them were women. Most workers are hired on a contract basis: some of them are hired for a fixed term under seasonal contracts and most are on daily contracts.

Historical Background of SEWA's work with construction workers

Gujarat: SEWA started the process of organizing workers in the mid-70s, when it took up the process of organizing headloaders. However, the actual process of organizing the construction workers came in 1996 when the mills in Ahmedabad started closing down, thus becoming a major cause of unemployment especially for the women workers in the mills, most of whom shifted to the construction industry, seeking livelihood. At that time, a demand came from the women workers in the mills, most of whom shifted to the construction industry, seeking livelihood. At that time, a demand came from the women workers in the construction industry to SEWA, about the fact that they also wanted to get organised like the women in other trades who had been organised by SEWA.

At the same time, the Central Government passed the Construction Workers Act which included the following two Acts: *The Building And Other Construction Workers' Welfare Cess Act, 1996* and *The Building And Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment And Conditions of Service) Act, 1996*. This was a major achievement for the construction workers in general, however, the implementation of these Acts in other states remained a point of concern. Further, the law that was made for the construction workers was a generic one and needed to be made context specific, as different states would have different issues. Thus, a State law, that would be on the lines of the Central Law and yet would be context and place specific.

Initially, SEWA conducted a survey in Ahmedabad city itself, in order to get basic information about the workers' conditions. This survey was conducted in 50 *nakas*¹ and

¹ labour points where labourers gather in the early morning hours to find work.

about 1000 forms were filled. Simultaneously campaign work for the construction workers in Gujarat was taken up by SEWA, informing the workers about the law passed by the Central Government for the construction workers, especially about the fact that they were entitled to social security.

From 1998 to 2003, an intensive campaign started pressing the demand for passing a state law for the construction workers in Gujarat itself. This campaign finally resulted in the law being passed in Gujarat for the construction workers.

Madhya Pradesh: The main focus of SEWA Madhya Pradesh's work with construction workers has been to study the work conditions, to find out about the socio-economic status and issues facing construction workers.

Methodology of the study: In Indore, first a survey was conducted in four areas of Indore. Further, discussions were held with construction workers and data was thus collected. From the city of Indore, the survey was conducted amongst 50 workers.

Delhi: It is estimated that there are 5 to 8 lakh construction workers in Delhi. Out of these 5 lakh workers, about 3 lakh workers are migrants and the rest 2 lakh are residents of Delhi. About 20% of the total construction workers in Delhi are women, which is in itself a huge percentage!

For the past few months, SEWA has been engaged in the process of organizing construction workers, in mainly two areas of Delhi: Anand Vihar and Raghbir Nagar. There are approximately 300 construction workers in Anand Vihar and approximately 200 construction workers in Raghbir Nagar. For the past 3 months, several meetings and group discussions have been held with the workers residing in both these areas, in order to understand in an in-depth manner, the issues and problems which they face both in their homes and workplaces.

In order to assess and study the socio-economic status of these workers, SEWA has recently completed a survey of 200 construction workers residing in two areas of Delhi, namely, Anand Vihar and Raghbir Nagar. The following is a report on the findings of this survey and the analysis based on the same.

AIM, METHODOLOGY AND TARGET SAMPLE

Aim

The main aim of the survey was to assess the socio-economic status of construction workers in Delhi.

Methodology

The survey to assess the socio-economic status of construction workers in Delhi was carried out in 2 areas of Delhi: *Raghubir Nagar and Anand Vihar*. The survey was a house-to-house one and questionnaires were used to conduct the survey.

Target Sample

The survey was conducted for 200 construction workers, which included construction workers of both Raghubir Nagar and Anand Vihar. A sample of 100 female construction workers and 100 male construction workers was taken for the survey. Also, a total of 100 workers were covered from Anand Vihar area and a total of 100 workers were covered from Raghubir Nagar. In Raghubir Nagar area, 2 blocks were covered: R-Block and F-Block.

Time Period

The survey was covered in a period of 15 days, starting from 17th August, 2006 and per day a minimum of 14 samples were collected.

Number of fieldworkers

There were a total of 5 fieldworkers involved in the process of conducting the survey, 2 in each area and 1 Coordinator.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN DELHI – A STUDY

The informal sector encompasses various categories of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, who are mostly migrants in search of income earning opportunities. Construction workers are not only just one of the categories of workers in the informal sector, but also one of the largest categories and one of the most exploited categories of workers within the sector.

Issues of insecurity, unstable employer-employee relationship, abysmally low levels of income and poor working conditions, coupled with the absence of social security legislations add to the plight of the construction workers. Moreover, the hierarchy within the industry is complex, which is characterized by a maze of contractor and sub-contractor relationships.

Delhi has an estimated 5-8 lakh construction workers, out of which an estimated 3 lakh workers are migrants. The study that has been done within two areas of Delhi, Raghubir Nagar and Anand Vihar, covering 200 construction workers is an attempt to understand in an indepth manner, the issues and concerns of the construction labour. In order to elicit responses that were not influenced by their contractors, the interviews were conducted at the homes of the workers. The issues that have been covered in the survey have been discussed under broad heads in this report.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Age, Sex and Family Size

The study shows that a majority percentage of the workers, about 52% of them are below 30 years of age, whereas, a mere 5% are above 50 years of age (*Figure 1*). Further, as *Figure 2* shows, 34% of women workers are below 30 years of age, whereas, about 4% are above the 50 age category. Out of these 34% all are married women and a mere 6% don't have children.

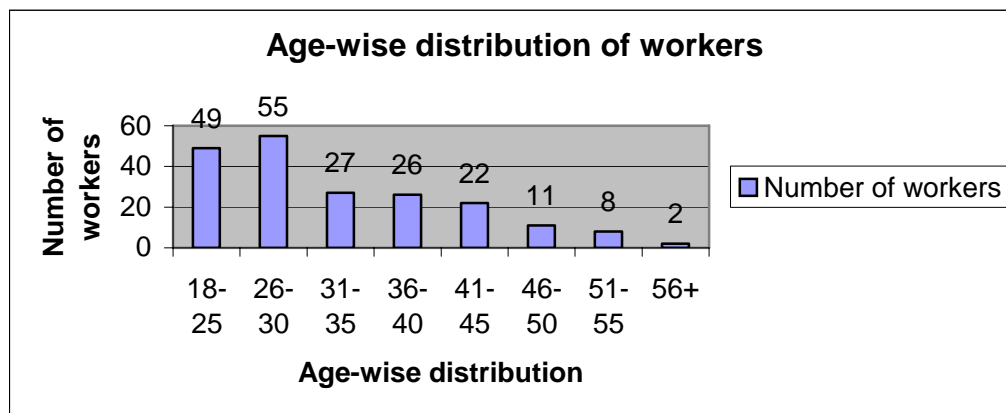


Figure 1

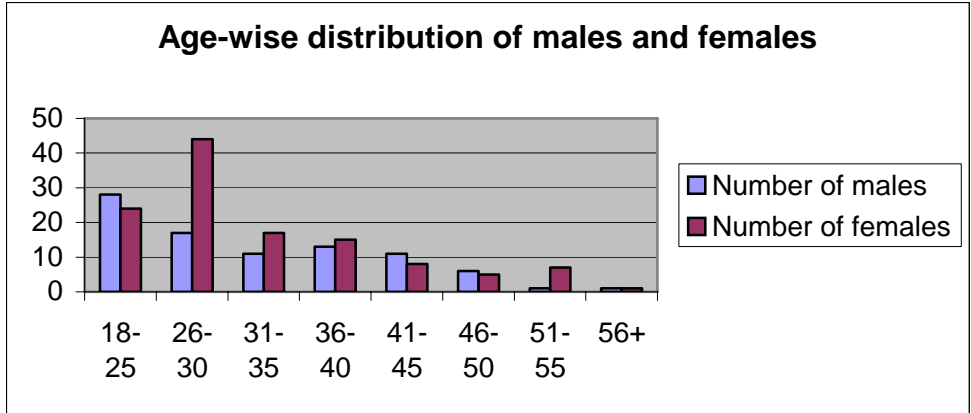


Figure 2

This factor brings out a very interesting aspect, that a huge percentage of the women workers are in their reproductive age and thus, the issue of their health becomes all the more important. It is at this reproductive age that a lot of the women workers, are doing hard physical labour like breaking stones, carrying heavy bricks several floors and above all, working long hours in a day.

Further, the study shows that the average number of children per family is 3, whereas the average family size is 5. Further, a majority of the respondents (70.5%) fall into the family size category of 4-8 (*Figure 3*). The study brings out that 49% of the respondents are the sole earners of their families, which in itself is a huge percentage. Large family sizes, coupled with the fact that most of the respondents are the sole earners of their families, adds to the plight of the workers, especially the women workers who have to not only look after their large families but also manage work.

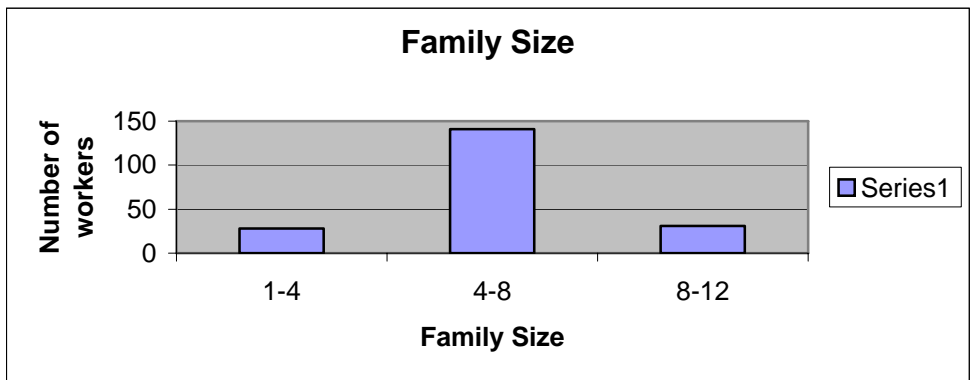


Figure 3

In the context of family size, one important point that needs a mention is that of migration. Due to migration, a lot of families have broken off from their joint families and are now living as nuclear families. A lot of women workers have reported the fact that because there is no one to look after their children at home, they are forced to take their children along with them to work. Thus, one can see clear links emerging between the issue of migration, family size and child-care.

Region and Caste

The study shows a majority of the respondents are migrants and only a minority belong to Delhi. 47% of the respondents are from Madhya Pradesh, mostly from the areas of Chattarpur, Mahua, Tikamgarh and Jhansi (*Figure 4*). Those belonging to Rajasthan mostly come from the areas of Sawai-Madhopur, Sikar and Dosa; respondents from Bihar mostly belong to Samastipur and those who have migrated from Uttar Pradesh are from Sultanpur and Azamgarh. In the process of exploring the reasons for the migration of workers, one point that has been common amongst all is the income factor and more chances of getting employment in cities than in villages. Further, most of the respondents are the second-generation migrants and thus, have settled in Delhi.

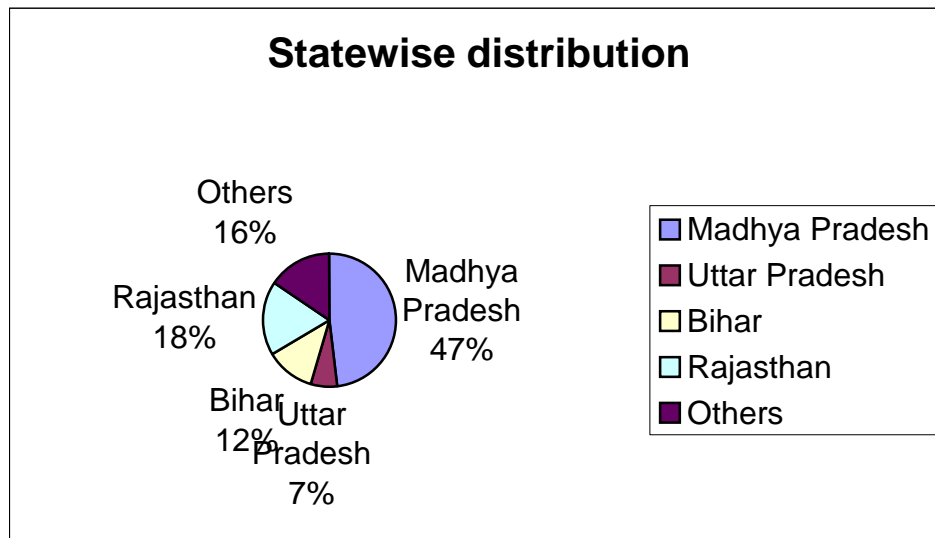


Figure 4

Further it has been observed that most of the workers belonging to a particular region are staying in close proximity and most of them are related to each other in some way or the other. Apart from the factor of being related, it has also been seen that the workers belonging to a particular caste are living close to each other.

Most of the workers belong to the castes of Ahirwar, Raibar, Ravidas, Bunkar, Bhairava, Banjara, Yadav and Kahar.

EDUCATIONAL STATUS

The study shows that 64% of the workers are illiterate (*Figure 5*). Also, only a mere 3% have reached the level of senior secondary, whereas, 22% are primary school dropouts

(Figure 6). A majority of respondents have been dropouts and have left school because of low levels of income and conditions of poverty. Further, a lot of workers have continued working in the construction sector, because this has been their traditional family occupation and has been carried over generations. There is also a feeling that because of being illiterate or semi-literate, the chances of getting employment in the formal sector are nil.

In the process of analyzing the aspirations of workers, the study shows that not a single worker wants that his or her child should continue working as a construction worker. However, because of low levels of income and unaffordable education, they feel that it is difficult for their children to continue their education. The issue of education of children has deep connections with the issue of shelter for children at workplace. As there is an absence of shelter for children at worksites, the workers are forced to carry their young infants along with them to the workplace and not only carry their young infants, but also their young school-going age children, so that the elder siblings can look after the younger ones. This adversely affects the education of the young school-going age children.

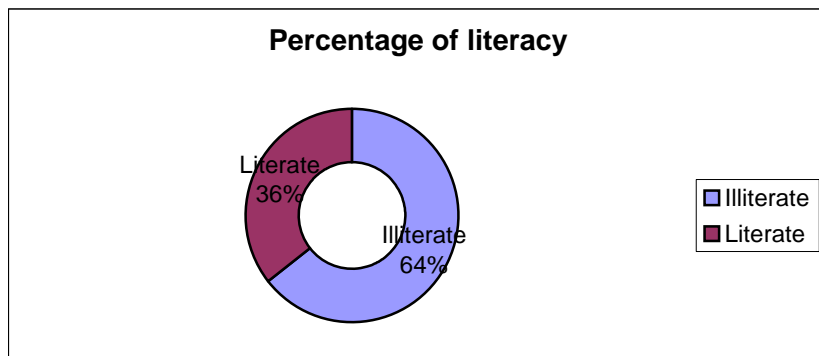


Figure 5

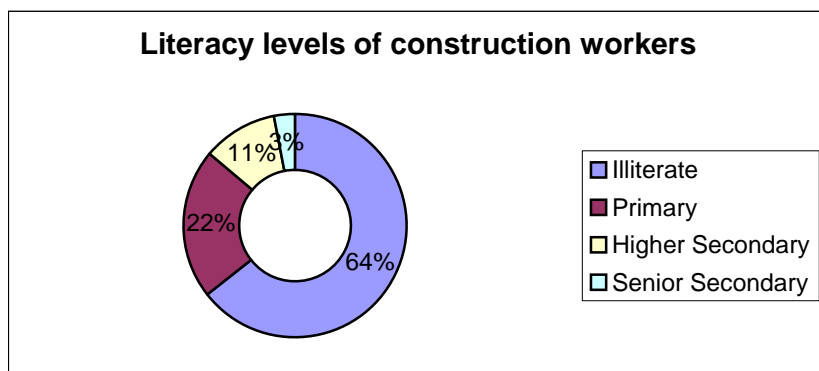


Figure 6

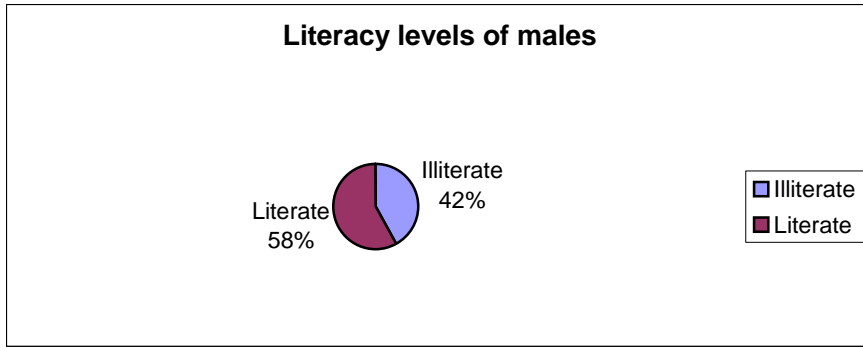


Figure 7

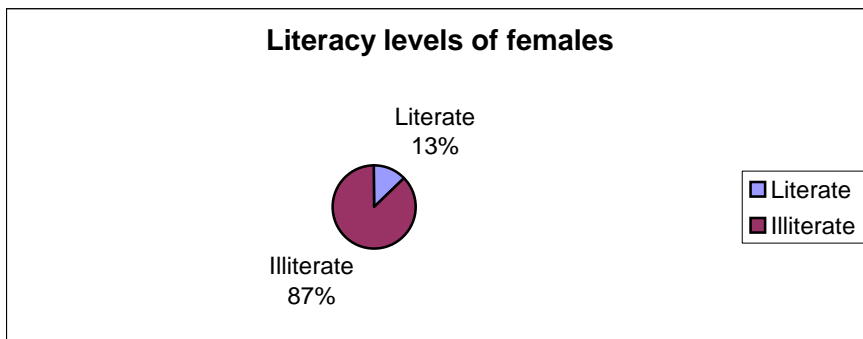


Figure 8

OCCUPATIONAL STATUS

Type of work

Figure 9 highlights the fact that a clear majority of the workers (77%) are *beldars* or unskilled workers, whereas, a small percentage of them are skilled (23%). In comparing male and female workers, the study brings out a striking fact, that none of the women workers are skilled and that all of the 23% of the skilled workers out of the total number of workers are men. Moreover, in comparing the percentage of unskilled female and male workers, the study has brought out that a clear majority of the unskilled workers are women (*Figure 10*).

Type of work	Number of workers	Male	Female	Percentage
Beldar	154	54	100	77%
Mason	30	30	0	15%
Painter	11	11	0	6%
Carpentary	3	3	0	2%
Electrician	2	2	0	1%

Figure 9

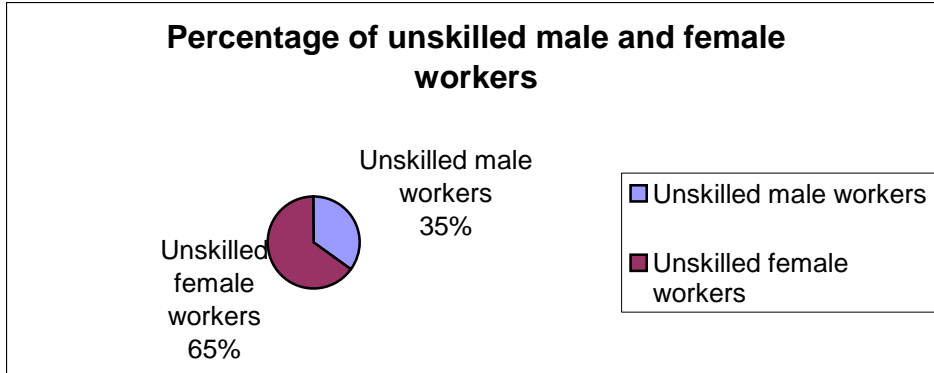


Figure 10

Further, a preponderant majority of the respondents (97%) have shown interest to upgrade their skills (*Figure 11*). Almost all of the workers have shown their inclination towards receiving training for skill upgradation, as they feel that it will lead to higher wages. However, the remaining minority have not been positive about receiving training as they feel that they will not be able to find time for it and that it will interfere in their work. Again, for receiving training for skill upgradation, a majority of the workers have shown interest in receiving training for masonry. Another interesting point that comes out of the study is the fact that none of the workers, both male and female, have received any formal training for skill upgradation. The only training that they have received has been through local craftsmen or has been imbibed on a hereditary basis.

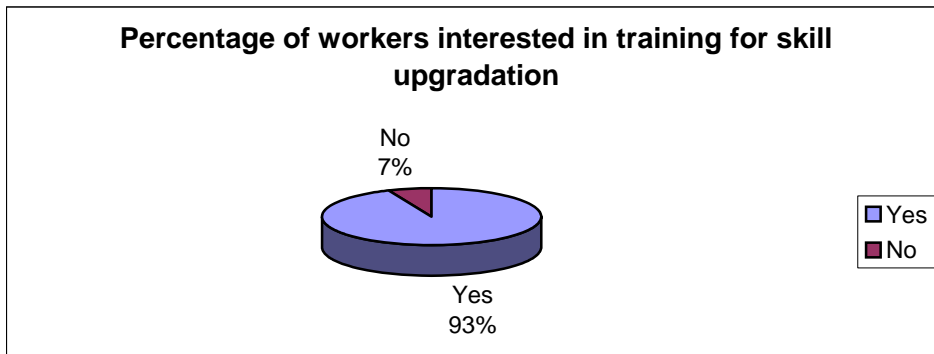


Figure 11

Talking about the work conditions, the study highlights that a huge majority of the workers (86%) work for 8-9 hours a day. Infact, some of the workers have responded by saying that a major problem with their work is that their working number of hours per day are never fixed and sometimes they even work for 10-12 hours in day. However, on being questioned about the fact that whether they get any extra wages for working overtime, almost all the workers have replied in the negative. Further, it has also been found out that those who find work from the *labour chowks*, about 22% of them, find it difficult to get work; whereas, the remaining 78% find work through the *thekedars* (contractors) or through local connections. Moreover, the study highlights that 43% of the women workers find work through local connections; whereas, 36% of the male workers find work through the local connections or *thekedars*. In the context of the process of

finding work, an interesting factor of societal norms has emerged. A majority of the women workers have brought out the fact that they do not find work through the *labour chowks* as their families, especially their husbands do not allow them to stand on the *chowk* and find work. Infact it is looked down upon to stand at the *chowks* and is supposed to be a man's domain.

In the context of the crucial issue of wages per day or *dihari*, the study clearly points out that there are clear wage differentials between male and female workers. About 35% of the total male workers, are being paid between Rs 80 to Rs 150 for each day of work; whereas, only a meagre 10% of the total female workers are being paid the same amount for each day of work. However, most of the female workers are being paid in the category of Rs 60-Rs 80 for each day of work, as *Figure 12* clearly shows. Added to this is the fact that for the same kind of work in the unskilled worker category, wage differentials exist and the women workers are paid upto Rs10 - Rs15 less than their male counterparts for each day of work.

Another fact that emerges from the study is that the skilled workers are being paid higher daily wages than the unskilled workers and are being paid anywhere between Rs 100 - Rs 150 per day. Thus, whereas, the unskilled workers are being paid on an average Rs80 per day; the skilled workers are being paid on an average Rs 100 per day. In terms of satisfaction with their daily wages, about 90% of the workers have reported saying that they are not satisfied with their wages and feel that they should be getting higher wages. Added to the factor of low wages is the fact that a preponderant majority of the workers (97%) do not get bonus on festivals and special occasions. The remaining few who have reported that they get bonus, claim that the bonus is a very small amount and that too depends from employer to employer.

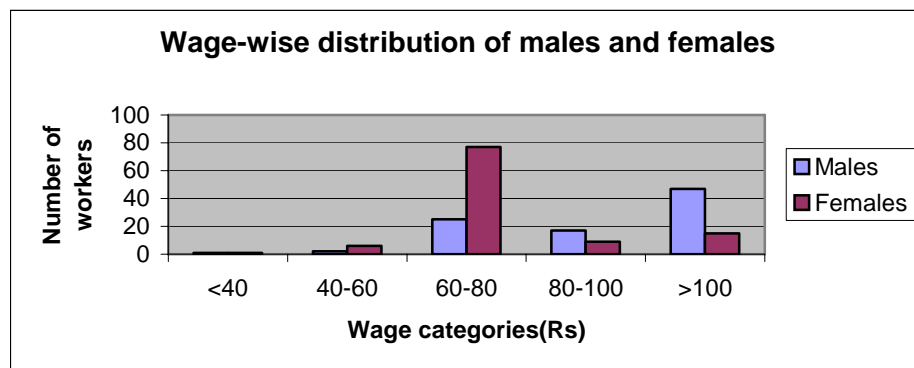


Figure 12

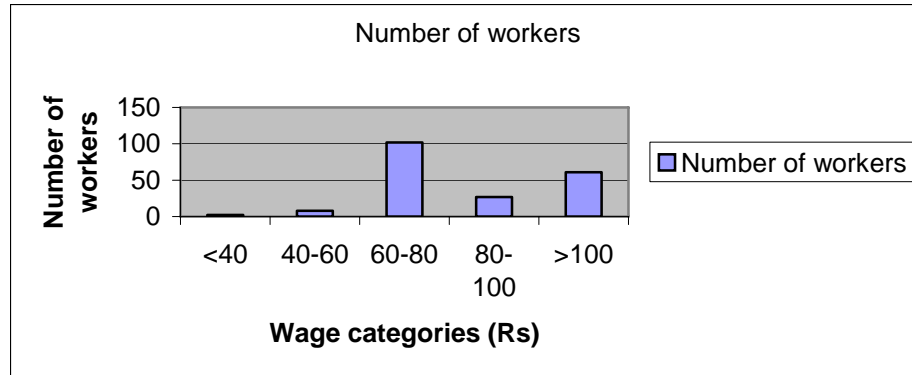


Figure 13

In the context of work status, a startling fact that arises from the study is that only 2% of the total number of workers get work throughout the year. The remaining work on an average 6-8 months a year and most of them have reported that even in a month, it is not necessary that they work on all days; most of them get work for around 15-20 days a month. Further, this work also depends heavily on the seasons. Most of the workers claim that they do not get work in the winter months and in the monsoons, in which period most of them go to their villages and help their families in farming. Thus, this fact itself brings home the point that the life of the workers in the construction industry is very insecure and is a story of daily survival.

In an attempt to understand the traditional occupation system and whether there has been a continuity in the construction work, the study shows that 66% of the workers claim that their parents have worked in the construction sector (*Figure 14*). This statistic stresses on the point that a majority of the workers have carried forward the family occupation of working as construction labour. The occupation of farming follows the occupation of construction work and thus shows that a sizeable amount of the workers have left the family occupation of farming and taken up construction work.

Workers' Parents' Occupation

Type of Work	Number of workers	Percentage
Construction worker	132	66%
Farmer	65	32.5%
Others	3	1.5%

Figure 14

The study also bring out the fact that a majority of the workers (91%) have been involved in construction work from the beginning. The remaining few have joined construction work after being involved in some other occupation. According to the workers, the main cause for the workers leaving their previous occupations to join construction work has been the fact they were not earning enough to sustain themselves and their families in their previous occupations.

SOCIAL SECURITY

The study has highlighted that accidents at worksites do not come into the rare category and are in fact quite common. 31% of the workers have reported accidents at worksites and most of the accidents have been due to workers falling off from tall buildings (*Figure15*). More importantly, the fact remains that none of the workers who have had accidents on worksites have been compensated by their employers and have instead had to borrow money and get treatment for themselves. Interviews with the workers have brought out that a lot of them have spent large sums on getting themselves treated.

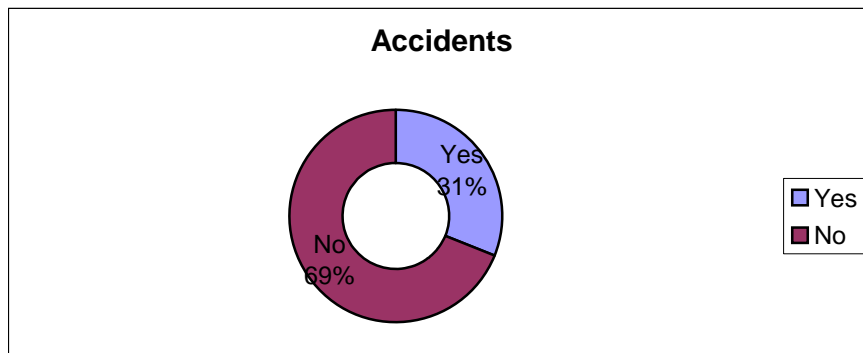


Figure 15

In the process of finding out the common health problems faced by the workers due to their harsh and arduous work, some of the problems that have emerged are fever, backache, stomachache, cold and general body ache. Almost every respondent has mentioned these problems and it has come out that in terms of treatment also, a majority of the workers get themselves treated from private hospitals, as they claim that Government hospitals are extremely slow in their procedures and services are also not available.

In the context of social security benefits, maternity benefit is a crucial one. However, a striking point that has come out is the fact that none of the women workers have received any sort of benefit from their employers at the time of pregnancy. Moreover, the study highlights the absence of any sort of child-care or creche facility at the workplace. Almost all of the women workers have responded by saying that they have to carry their young children to their worksites and have no choice but to keep their children along with them on the roads, on mud or wherever they work.

Also, a majority of the workers (97%) have reported that they have no insurance; whereas, in terms of savings, the study has brought out that only a small percentage of the workers (6%) have savings.

GOVERNMENT SCHEMES AND THE WELFARE BOARD

The Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Board has been operational in Delhi since November 2005. However, the most startling and thought-provoking fact that the study has brought out is that not only has a single worker not registered herself or himself in the Board, but also that not a single worker has heard about the Board (Figure 16)! Infact a lot of workers have responded by saying that it is through the survey that they have got to know about the Board for the very first time. Moreover, none of the workers are a part of any Government scheme or have not till date availed of any benefits under any Government scheme.

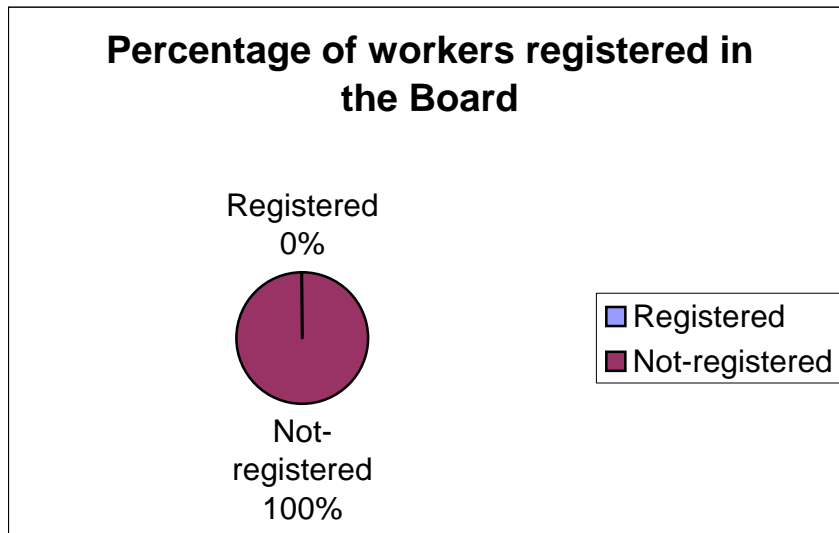


Figure 16

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the study brings out the extreme insecurity, hardship and lack of social security benefits in the lives of construction workers. From unequal and discriminatory wages, to harsh working conditions, to the absence of child-care and health benefits, the workers in the construction industry are a neglected lot. For the workers in the construction industry, the main priority is that of having work that is regular and thus gives them a regular income. Unlike the workers in the formal sector, these workers are being denied of basic social security benefits that they should be getting, from their employers and from the Government.

On the other hand, the study shows little or no awareness on the part of the workers with regard to the Board that has been formed solely for the benefit of the construction workers. The fact that none of the workers interviewed have got themselves registered in the Board, increases the necessity of taking up active measures to increase levels of awareness amongst the workers and also an initiative on the part of the Government to make sure that more and more workers register themselves in the Board.

Today in the rapidly developing city of Delhi, where a lot of construction work is becoming visible through the ever-increasing malls, multiplexes and other such structures, a lot of workers are migrating from other states to Delhi to search for employment opportunities. However, the work that they are doing is being carried out under appalling conditions, with no minimum standards of working conditions being followed. In the absence of any basic standards being maintained at the worksites, the conditions of the workers keep deteriorating.

It is in this context that social security legislation for workers in the informal sector becomes of crucial importance. The provision of social security is the primary responsibility of both Central and State Governments. Due to poor implementation, the unorganised sector workers are denied protection of Minimum Wages Act, Equal Remuneration Act and Workmen Compensation Act. Thus, this absence of a social security legislation simply reinforces the need for various civil society organisations, trade unions and the Central and State Governments to come together frequently and give the thought of having a social security legislation for workers in the informal sector a serious thought.