

Bricks Without Glory Exploring the Livelihood and Labour Realities of Women Construction Workers in Chennai

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Abstract—This study explores the gendered dimensions of labour and livelihood among women construction workers in Chennai. Drawing on primary field data and recent national-level reports (IIHS 2023, ILO 2025), the paper highlights persistent wage disparities, informal work patterns, and systemic exclusion from social protection. Women workers, earning an average of ₹412/day, remain concentrated in unskilled roles with limited upward mobility, poor access to facilities, and minimal awareness of welfare boards like BOCW. Despite contributing significantly to urban infrastructure, they face unsafe work environments, long hours, and limited legal support. The study calls for urgent reforms in labour policy, skill training, and gender-sensitive planning. It advocates targeted interventions such as site-level welfare audits, grievance redressal systems, and better enforcement of gender-inclusion mandates. These insights provide a timely perspective on the vulnerabilities and aspirations of women construction workers in urban India.”

I. INTRODUCTION

The construction industry is one of India's largest employers, with a significant share of its workforce engaged in the informal sector. Among them, women construction workers remain one of the most invisible and underserved segments, especially in urban hubs like Chennai. These women often work as unskilled labourers, performing physically demanding tasks for low wages and without access to job security or welfare protections. Despite their substantial contribution to infrastructure development, their work is undervalued and their challenges underreported. According to recent reports (IIHS, 2023; ILO, 2025), women constitute a small but vital part of the construction workforce, earning on average ₹412 per day, significantly lower than their male counterparts.

Most of them are employed as casual labourers without formal contracts, medical benefits, or maternity protections. Moreover, lack of facilities such as toilets, childcare, and safe drinking water at worksites further affects their productivity and dignity at work.

In Chennai, these problems are compounded by rapid urbanization, rising living costs, and the increasing informalization of labour. Migrant women from rural Tamil Nadu and neighbouring states form a major part of the construction workforce, often working under subcontractors in exploitative conditions. The failure to enforce gender-sensitive labour standards, combined with low awareness about legal rights and welfare schemes like the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act, deepens their vulnerability.

This study investigates the employment and livelihood conditions of women construction workers in Chennai. It aims to document their socio-economic profile, understand the nature of their work, examine the gaps in welfare access, and suggest policy measures that can enhance their economic security and social inclusion.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. Examine the socio-economic background of women construction workers in Chennai.
2. Analysed their employment patterns, wage levels, and job security.
3. Investigate their awareness and access to social welfare schemes like BOCW.
4. Explore the working conditions, health risks, and gender-specific challenges faced by them.

5. Recommend policy interventions for improving their livelihood and social protection.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The ILO (2025) observed that only 12% of India’s construction workforce comprises women, and even fewer hold skilled or supervisory positions. It emphasized the absence of formal training opportunities, safety mechanisms, and wage parity as major obstacles to gender inclusion in the sector.

Research on women in India’s construction sector highlights persistent gender disparities in wages, working conditions, and social protection. According to the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS, 2023), 96.9% of women in the construction workforce are employed as casual labourers, earning an average of ₹412 per day. Most remain unaware of welfare schemes like the BOCW Act and lack access to benefits such as health insurance or maternity leave.

A study by Soundarya Priya and Anandh (2024), conducted in Tamil Nadu, found that women construction professionals face greater physical exhaustion and limited prospects for skill-based advancement compared to their male counterparts. Their findings suggest that women’s roles in construction remain confined to unskilled and repetitive labour due to institutional gender bias.

A Habitat for Humanity India Policy Brief (2023) focused on the need for on-site welfare infrastructure such as sanitation, drinking water, and crèche facilities. The report also advocated for improved registration of women workers under welfare boards to enable access to benefits.

Despite the growing literature on gender and informal labour, city-specific research in urban Tamil Nadu, particularly Chennai, remains limited. This study addresses that gap by focusing on the lived realities of women construction workers in Chennai, capturing their employment patterns, social security access, and everyday challenges.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive research design, relying on both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data was collected through structured interviews conducted with 60 women construction workers across selected sites in Chennai, including

areas like Perungattur Pallavaram, and Porur. A purposive sampling method was used to identify respondents, focusing on daily-wage female labourers engaged in unskilled construction tasks. A semi-structured questionnaire was developed covering socio-economic background, work experience, wage details, health issues, access to welfare schemes, and safety conditions. Informal discussions with site supervisors were also conducted to validate responses and understand site-level practices.

Secondary data was sourced from recent reports by IIHS (2023), ILO (2025), Habitat India (2023), and various government labour department publications. Data was analysed using simple percentages and descriptive statistics, and presented through tables and charts to highlight employment patterns, wage disparities, and welfare gaps. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality, voluntary participation, and informed consent were strictly maintained throughout the data collection process.

V. ANALYSIS AND KEY FINDINGS

This section presents the key findings from the primary field survey conducted among 60 women construction workers in Chennai. The analysis captures their socio-economic background, workplace conditions, access to welfare schemes, health concerns, and gender-specific challenges. The findings are supported by data tables with explanations for clarity and insight.

Table 1.1: Socio-Economic Profile

Indicator	Findings
Age Group	Majority between 26–45 years
Education Level	74% (44 of 60) had low/no education
Marital Status	68% married with dependents

Source: Primary Field Survey, July 2025

Interpretation.

The data indicates that most women in the construction sector are from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds, with limited education and heavy family responsibilities. These constraints severely restrict

their opportunities for mobility and better employment.

Table 1.2: Worksite Conditions and Welfare Access

Indicator	Findings
BOCW Awareness	92% (55 of 60) unaware
Toilets Available	Only 14% (8 of 60) had access
Crèche Facility	0% access
Safety Gear	6% (4 of 60) received helmets/gloves

Source: Primary Field Survey, July 2025

Interpretation.

The majority of the women workers surveyed had no knowledge of the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Welfare Board and were therefore excluded from legal welfare schemes. Worksites lacked basic amenities, especially toilets and crèche facilities, making them unsuitable for women. Protective gear was rarely provided, placing them at continuous risk.

Table 1.3: Health and Labour Challenges

Indicator	Findings
Chronic Pain	88% (53 of 60) reported back/body pain joint pain
Missed Work Due to Illness	42% (25 of 60) had missed work recently
Harassment at Site	18% (11 of 60) faced it, none reported
Migration Pattern	64% (38 of 60) from rural TN, 22% interstate

Source: Primary Field Survey, July 2025

Interpretation.

A significant number of respondents reported suffering from chronic physical pain due to manual labour without ergonomic support. Despite regular illness, there was no health coverage or paid leave. Harassment at worksites was reported by 18%, yet no redressal systems were in place. The large share of migrant workers further limits their ability to access consistent employment or benefits.

The data highlights a consistent pattern of gendered labour exclusion. marked by low education, informal employment, wage gaps, absence of basic facilities, and no legal or social protection. These findings

reinforce the urgent need for policy interventions that centre women's voices in the construction industry.

1 Secondary Data Insights

This section presents secondary data collected from national and international reports focusing on women construction workers in India. The data provides a broader context to compare with the field findings in Chennai. Each table below is based on a single, credible source and followed by a short explanation.

Table 2.1: Summary from ILO (2025)

Indicator	Value / Statistic
Women in total construction workforce	12%
Wage gap vs. men	30–40% less
Women in supervisory roles	<2%
Access to formal training	Very limited
Career progression support	Almost absent

Source: International Labour Organization (ILO), 2025.

The ILO report points out the underrepresentation of women in India's construction workforce and their limited access to training and career advancement. The persistent wage gap and near-absence in supervisory roles reinforce the structural inequality seen in the Chennai study. This global perspective strengthens the case for more inclusive and gender-sensitive labour policies.

Table 2.2: Summary from IIHS (2023)

Indicator	Value / Statistic
Women as casual labourers	96.9%
Women in salaried roles	0.5%
Average daily wage	₹412
Urban female participation (2022–23)	3.1%
Sites with basic facilities	<10%
Access to social protection	<20%

Source: Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS), 2023.

The IHS report highlights that women construction workers in India are overwhelmingly engaged as casual labourers, with minimal access to formal employment or benefits. The low average wage and poor site infrastructure mirror the ground realities observed in Chennai. These findings confirm that the challenges faced by women in Chennai reflect a broader national pattern of gender-based exclusion in the construction sector.

Table 2.3: Summary from Habitat India (2023)

Indicator	Value / Statistic
Aware of BOCW Welfare Board	16%
Registered under BOCW	9%
Sites with toilets	<10%
Access to drinking water	Inconsistent
Childcare provision	Rare
Grievance redressal	Negligible

Source: Habitat for Humanity India, 2023.

Habitat India’s policy brief highlights a lack of compliance with basic labour welfare standards on construction sites. Low awareness and registration under the BOCW Act, combined with a lack of essential services such as sanitation and childcare, align closely with the issues reported by women workers in Chennai. This suggests a systemic issue in enforcing welfare provisions for women in the sector. This diagram presents a visual summary of the key challenges identified through the field study of women construction workers in Chennai. The analysis shows a pattern of systemic exclusion from economic insecurity and unsafe working conditions to lack of welfare access and gender-based discrimination. Each category highlights a different dimension of the lived experiences of these workers, reinforcing the urgent need for policy reform and targeted welfare implementation.

VI. SUGGESTIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the primary findings and comparative analysis with secondary sources, the following suggestions are made to improve the employment and livelihood conditions of women construction workers in Chennai:

1. Mandatory Registration under BOCW Welfare Board

All women workers must be registered under the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Welfare Board. Registration should be simplified through on-site camps, mobile units, and partnerships with local NGOs to ensure access to maternity benefits, insurance, pension, and education support for children.

2. Provision of Gender-Sensitive Infrastructure at Worksites

Construction companies must be mandated to provide clean, functional toilets, drinking water, rest sheds, and crèche facilities at every site. These facilities are not only legal requirements but critical for dignity, hygiene, and productivity, especially for female workers.

3. Enforcement of Minimum Wages and Timely Payment

Strict monitoring by labour departments should ensure compliance with wage laws. Wage slips, payment through bank accounts, and grievance channels must be made compulsory. Contractors should be held accountable for underpayment and delays.

4. Skill Development and Upgradation for Women

Women should be included in skill training programs under the National Skill Development Mission. Courses in masonry, finishing work, electricals, and machinery operation can help transition them from unskilled to semi-skilled roles, enabling better pay and job security.

5. Safety Equipment and Health Support

Employers must provide safety equipment including helmets, gloves, and protective footwear must be ensured by employers. In addition, health check-ups, first aid kits, and referrals to ESI services should be made part of the standard site protocol, with penalties for non-compliance.

6. Creation of Worker Helplines and Redressal Systems

Women workers should have access to dedicated helplines and complaint cells in Tamil language to report harassment, wage theft, and unsafe conditions. These should be fast-tracked with local labour officials and women’s welfare officers.

7. Awareness Drives on Rights and Entitlements

Periodic awareness camps should be organized at labour hotspots in Chennai to educate women about their rights under BOCW, wage laws, and workplace

safety norms. IEC materials in Tamil, street plays, and radio outreach can increase awareness and enrolment.

8. Inclusive Policy Monitoring

Local bodies and labour enforcement wings must collect gender-disaggregated data on workers, and conduct regular audits to ensure women's needs are included in urban labour policies.

VII. CONCLUSION

Women construction workers form an essential yet invisible part of urban India's workforce. This study, based on a field survey in Chennai, reveals that most women workers operate in informal, insecure, and exploitative conditions. Despite existing legislative frameworks like the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act, implementation gaps remain vast. A majority of women are unaware of their rights, lack access to basic site-level infrastructure, and receive lower wages despite performing physically strenuous tasks.

The findings show consistent challenges: lack of social security, poor access to health care and sanitation, unsafe working conditions, and deep gender inequality. These are further intensified by their migration status, illiteracy, and absence of formal representation.

When these insights are compared with national-level secondary data from IIHS (2023), ILO (2025), and Habitat India (2023), it becomes clear that these problems are not isolated they are systemic and widespread across India's construction sector.

Urgent and gender-sensitive policy interventions are needed from ensuring BOCW registration and improving site conditions to empowering women through skill development, wage protection, and legal support.

A just and inclusive construction industry must place women at the centre not just as labourers, but as rightful contributors to India's urban growth.

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