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**“Strong Women, Weak Bodies, Muted Voices: Tracing the Lives of Women
Construction Workers in India’s Capital City”**

Krishna Raj Summer Fellowship Programme, 2011-12

Centre for Development Economics,

Delhi School of Economics

August 25, 2011

“The attempts to transform Delhi into a globally competitive city ride on an exclusionary discourse where only higher-income groups – a small percentage of the city’s population – are considered worthy of citizenship rights in the city. The constitutional rights of the working classes are trampled upon with impunity: their homes and workspaces are demolished to make way for the ‘world-class’ city...If we see the impact ongoing policies have had on the lives and livelihoods of the majority of its citizens, we can safely say that whether or not Delhi becomes a world-class city, it will definitely be successful in becoming an apartheid city in the not too distant future.” (Batra 2010: 17) The appearance of criticisms such as this one articulated by Lalit Batra about the changing nature of the capital city of Delhi is striking when juxtaposed with what seems to be an endless effort on the part of the city to build or construct its way into becoming a so-called mega-city or global-city or world-class city. Batra is not alone when he makes his observation about the flawed character of this idea and process of transformation undertaken by the administrators of this city-state and nor am I alone in noticing the endless construction project undertaken by the public and private actors across the city. Aman Sethi observes, “Delhi looked like a giant construction site inhabited by bulldozers, cranes and massive columns of prefabricated concrete; but the rubble has marked the incredible changes and dislocations of factories, homes and livelihoods that occurred as Delhi changed from a sleepy North Indian city into a glistening metropolis of a rising Asian superpower.” (Sethi 2011: 38) If Delhi is building its way towards becoming a superpower, through mammoth infrastructural and construction projects that overlook the real needs and conveniences of the majority of its citizens who are poor, then what is the story of those very people whose hard work helps pull up these massive structures?

Who are these invisible people who are building this ‘world-class’ city? Men and women from across the country migrate to Delhi to participate in the creation of this fantastical city. But, what is their experience of the process in which they participate? The role played by women who are employed in the construction of Delhi’s mega-structures is even more intriguing than the men, for they not only become workers-earners in the city, but also fulfill the roles of mother-wife-householder and what does the city give them in return? Does the city acknowledge them as its citizens who build its foundations and lay its bricks and do these women then call the city their home? To understand the place of this migrant community of

women construction workers in this transforming city and bring out the voices of the a sub-set of the people Batra and Sethi accuse the capital's mega projects of muting, this report undertakes an ethnographical study of this group of workers in the National Capital Region.

Finding Women at Construction in Literature

The existing literature on construction workers can be divided in to four categories. The first category is of journalistic accounts. They range from reports in the media about mishaps or misconduct at construction sites to detailed reportage of few chosen construction workers and their lives by journalists such as Aman Sethi. However, there is no distinguishable narrative about women who work at construction sites in these reports and essays. In larger studies about migrant workers in the city of Delhi, there is mention of construction as a sector where these workers seek employment. Many such studies emerged in the late seventies and eighties, on migrant workers. Atreyi Majumdar's (1980) *In-migration and Informal Sector*, looks at construction as one sector where migrants seek employment and often their unskilled work at these construction sites is not recorded in the formal economy. She analyzes the reasons for migration, but not life in the city. Construction is similarly mentioned as a provider of employment for migrants to India's cities in other studies concerned with migration, such as M.S.A. Rao's (1986) collection of *Studies in Migration* and T.K. Majumdar's (1983) *Urbanising Poor*, both published in the eighties. In none of these collections are women who work in construction analyzed as a separate category. There is recognition of their hardships, but the authors acknowledge their lack of empirical data on women specifically. More recently, Bikram Pattnaik (2009) studied young, migrant construction workers in Chandigarh in an attempt to understand who comes to that city in search of such work, what are the factors determining their migration to the city and their working and living conditions in the city. His conclusion is that economic forces drive people to migrate to Chandigarh and seek employment in construction and they are generally poorly paid and live in miserable conditions in the city. He recognizes that migrant women have a tougher time in the city than men, but again the focus of his study remains the young, male migrant. Barnabas, Anbarasu and Clifford (2011) survey women construction workers in Tamil Nadu to understand their work environment and recommend skill development as a means of empowering these women. While their data collection and

recommendations are unique because they focus solely on women, the aspect of negotiation of and balance between work and the household remains missing from their analysis. Hence, women construction workers have not been the central subjects of analysis in academic work coming out of India either.

The third type of literature available on construction workers are reports published by activist-researchers and NGOs, a significant number of which came out of Delhi in the wake of the Commonwealth Games of 2010. Mobile Crèches, the People's Union for Democratic Rights, Labour File are some of the organizations that commissioned and published reports on the working and living conditions of migrant construction workers in Delhi. The Mobile Crèches report (2008) concludes that women construction workers are thrice burdened as they are mostly malnourished and in that condition have to do hard labour, run a home and raise children in a hostile urban environment. Much of this category of literature focuses on the legal rights of migrant construction workers and analyzes the various legal clauses or conditions that are flouted by employers, whether public or private.

The last type of literature consists of governmental documentation of the construction sector. The Shram Shakti report (1988) was one of the first commissioned studies to report on the pathetic work and living conditions of women construction workers. It highlighted the bare minimum wages paid to women in the construction industry, the lack of recognition of their contribution to the industry, health and sanitation problems faced by them, lack of skill development and dependence on husbands or fathers and then on *thekedars*. After this report however, there has been no significant government report on women construction workers. National Sample Surveys on migration again, mention the growth of the construction sector as attracting more men and women from the hinterland to India's metropolises. Lastly, labour laws are significant in understanding what has been the policymakers' view of the construction worker specifically and women labourers in general. A review of the literature shows that in general focused research on the construction industry's workforce has been missing. In migration studies, construction has found mention and in reports on worker's rights. Then too, researchers have found it easier to access and speak to men who work on construction sites and their findings reflect their condition more than that of the women. The experiences of the women have

found little mention in the literature available and hence, it is the attempt of this study to give a voice to them.

Finding Construction Sites, Finding the Women

Choosing to study migrant women construction workers, who do not come from Delhi's slums but live in facilities on the site, meant first locating their places of work. Construction sites are sprawling across the city, yet they are some of the most difficult spaces to access. Security guards keep a check at all entrances to construction sites and trespassers, including researchers who wish to talk to workers, especially the women, are not welcome. Labour activists such as Subhash Bhatnagar of the Nirmaan Mazdoor Panchayat criticize such practices at construction sites, as it is the right of a citizen to freely enquire about other citizen's working conditions. However, the practice of protecting and maintaining secrecy at the worksite have become a norm at construction sites, both public and private. As a result, it became necessary to find a means of accessing these sites through organizations that have permission to work in them, especially with the women labourers. These considerations led to collaboration with Mobile Crèches, who allowed visits to a site in Gurgaon where they had a long-established crèche facility and another at Dwarka, where a fully functional crèche was not yet operational.

Talking to mothers who visited the crèche to feed their babies, pick and up and drop their children or to just keep an eye on them, was easier as they felt safe in the setting of the school. While most of my conversations in Gurgaon took place within the established crèche, at Dwarka they all took place outside. In Gurgaon too, I tried to speak to other women who did not have children to drop off or their children didn't go to the crèche, but they were afraid to communicate freely as they feared a supervisor or co-worker might overhear out conversation. The Gurgaon site was very large, with over a thousand workers, hence there was more scrutiny here and women felt they could lose their job easily. However, once within the walls of the crèche, they spoke freely.

It was a deliberate choice to restrict this study to those women who are migrants and work and live at construction sites and their labour residential facilities respectively. These women live in between the city and the village, as they are not permanently settled in one place. Even if they have been in the city for over ten years,

they have kept moving from one work site to another and along with it from one worker's camp to another. They don't live in one particular slum or colony of Delhi and commute to work everyday, hence they have no stability of a long established home or address. Their experience of the city is then, even more fragile as the feeling of being visitors and not citizens comes easily, with very poor living conditions and almost no civic amenities available to them.

Methodology

The use of a structured questionnaire for a study where the objective is to unearth the daily lives and survival strategies of women construction workers in a large and alien metropolis. To bring out the details about work and family, it became a better practice to have unstructured conversations with these women and hence, participant observation became my chosen method of fieldwork and research. Various case studies from the field are thus used throughout the report to bring out themes that are relevant to the workers themselves and from an analytical point of view of the researcher. Along with the workers, I have also included the experiences and observations of staff at Mobile Crèches, health care professionals and labour rights activists, to help get some perspective on the issued at hand.

The report presented below is an ethnography then, combining the voice of the migrant woman construction worker, the researcher's observation, expert's views and secondary resource material. Language as used by the workers is mentioned at various points, as those phrases are difficult to capture in the their entirety in an English translation of them. Concepts such as time, space, work, city, country are explained and used in terms of how these women perceive them. A combination of these research and reporting tools is perhaps the more wholesome method to understand the lives of the migrant woman worker, her contribution to the city trying to create an image of itself through its physical structures and the response of that very city to her work.

The Idea and the Experience of Work and of Residence

My conversation with Lakshmi began abruptly. I was asking a young girl at a construction site questions about her work and her family when Lakshmi interrupted and said that "If you want to know about construction workers then ask people like

me, not a young girl who has not seen enough of the world.” She was eager to share her story with me, although she did not understand why I would be interested in something that she would describe as mundane.

“There is nothing beautiful about our life stories. But if you wish to hear, then I will tell you”, claimed Lakshmi, an old-timer in the construction industry. I met her in the maze of construction sites that is Dwarka. She had the confident gaze of someone who has been part of India’s construction boom story and of this capital city for many years, as she did not shy away from my questions and continued to give me a detailed insight in to her years as a labourer. Lakshmi first came to Delhi from a village in the Bilaspur district of what is now Chhattisgarh, some twenty years ago. Twenty years according to her calculation of time. It was actually 1984. She remembered that it was in the same year that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had been assassinated. So much time had passed, said Lakshmi, it definitely felt like twenty years. Hence, any further questions about her age or her children’s were pointless, as she would only ask me to estimate their years based on the fact that she first came to Delhi “twenty” years earlier. We both finally estimated that she must be about forty-two years old.

Lakshmi then began to narrate why she and her husband chose to live away from their village. Her father-in-law had some property to be divided amongst his four sons, if they could buy out their share from him. Two out of four sons chose to come to the city with a *thekedar* from their block and began work in the construction industry. Out of the other two, one became a teacher and another remained in the village working on the land. The plan was that she and her husband would work hard for a few years, save as much money as they could, return to their village and buy out their share of the property to then live peacefully in the comfort of the hamlet. However, this was not to be. It had been twenty-seven years and they were still moving from one construction site to another in the capital. Lakshmi’s husband began visiting the local *theka* and they lost all their money to his alcoholism. It was a habit he had picked up only in the city. Fear of his family had prevented such behavior in the village, assumes Lakshmi. But what fear? Now he fearlessly blows up all their hard-earned money on alcohol and defies the pleas of his wife, children and brothers to give up. Lakshmi’s father-in-law is no more, but her husband’s share of the property is still kept aside for him to purchase. But she knows that her brothers-in-law

and their families will run out of patience soon, and she hopes that her husband will mend his ways before that happens.

“I try and tell him to not drink so much, but he only shouts back at me, abusing, cursing and then hits me in front of our children”, says Lakshmi remorsefully. She looks around to ensure that her husband is not listening to our conversations, as he will only think that she is complaining about him. She says there is a limit to being treated so inhumanly, but that does not imply that she would consider leaving her husband. Who will take care of him? What will she tell her children? She can’t stop him from drinking and has even had to rush him to the hospital in emergencies. So, she does what she says every woman in her line of work does – lie to her husband and stash away emergency money by burying it in the earth that forms the floor of her hut. I ask her about opening a bank account. She laughs, calls me naïve. Firstly, she has no documentation mentioning her name, place of origin and other such details and secondly, if there were a pressing need for cash how would she access a bank immediately? There were usually no bank branches located next to the remote construction sites she has been working on. So, the earth suffices for a safe deposit box.

Lakshmi presses some tobacco between her thumb and her left palm as she begins to tell me about her children. She explains, the tobacco chewing is a vile habit the loneliness of the city has compelled her to adopt. Her children are the ones she is most worried about. Unable to send them to school in the city or keep them in the village, she lets them wander around the construction site. She has a daughter who was married to another construction worker some years ago and her older son also works on the same site now. She has two younger sons who play in and out of the work site and their home at the “labour camp”. Lakshmi complains about how helpless someone in her position is when it comes to giving her children access to any education. She never went to school, but she had always believed that she would send her own off spring. The construction sites she has worked at had no crèches for younger children and there generally was no government school in the vicinity. She complained that there was also a terrible lack of information about educational and health institutes in the city, as it was not as compact as the village where every dweller knew where the local school and hospital were located.

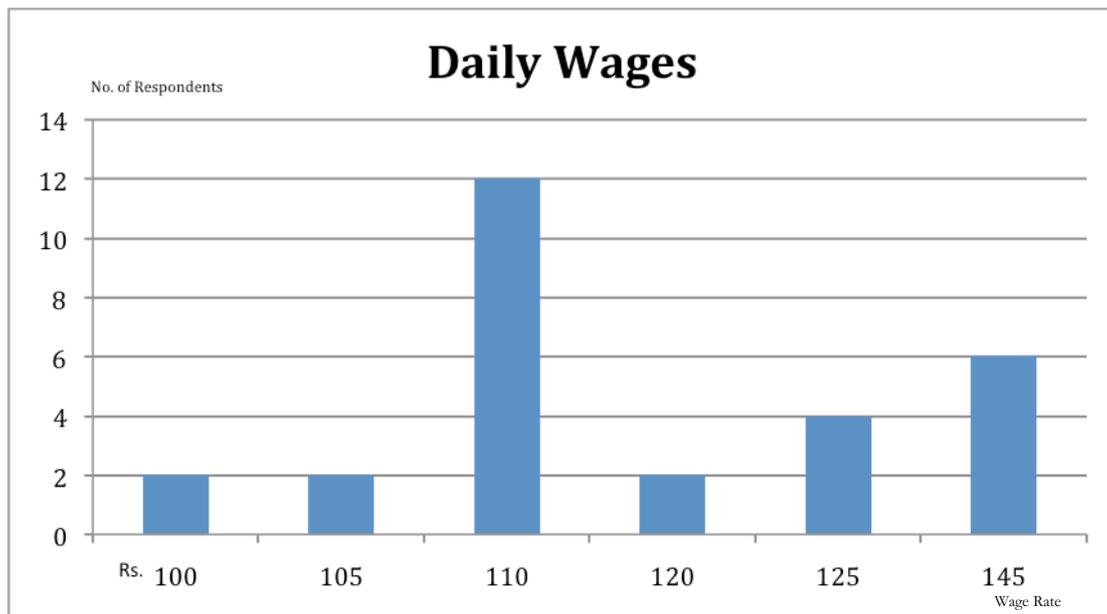
Workers like Lakshmi who assist their husbands in “plaster ka kaam” make Rs. 110 daily. The wage given by the employer is Rs. 125, but fifteen rupees must also go to the *thekedar*. At a moment of crisis, it is after all the *thekedar* who will come to her rescue she says, even if he is corrupt. The hundred and ten rupees are not sufficient according to Lakshmi for a family with children, an alcoholic and no filial support system to survive a city such as Delhi. So then why live here anymore, I asked? She smiles again and says, “Par hum gareeb log hain. Ab aur kahaan jayenge?”, summing up what is perhaps every women construction workers dilemma – where else do we go to earn a living, since we have no training, no skills and no one to tell us about any other opportunities.

What loomed throughout our conversation was of Lakshmi’s fear her husband hearing us by accident and then becoming angry and upset with her. Yet, she shared the narrative of her years eagerly. She had become a nomad within the city of Delhi and longed to go back to her village for more than just a visit, put her younger children in to a school and enjoy a day without having to haul heavy construction material or worry about being able put dinner on her children’s plate that evening.

Lakshmi’s story is a microcosm of the nature of a labourer’s work and life in the construction industry in India’s capital city. The prospect of better employment or employment in general pushes people out of villages and pulls them towards the city. The 64th Round of the National Sample Survey (2010) found that in 2007-2008, 38% of rural and urban out-migrants, both male and female, in India move for employment related reasons. This is only second to marriage, for which 54% of migrants move according the NSS report. 25% of the population migrating to the cities get employment in the construction industry, according to the same NSS data. If the NSS data is compared to figures published by the International Labour Organization on employment in India, it seems like between 1999 and 2005, approximately 10,00,000 people have been employed in the construction industry each year. Activists such as Subhash Bhatnagar of the Nirmaan Mazdoor Panchayat estimate that in the state of Delhi alone, approximately 10 lakh workers are employed by construction. Hence, various data sources are not accurate and hence, always helpful in trying to map out the numbers of men and women employed as construction workers. The reason for this is perhaps the various ways in which construction labourers are categorized by the builders and contractors and the duration of their work in the city.

Traditionally, construction workers come in groups led by a *thekedar* who might be an old construction worker himself or a known member of the village or district who has contacts in the city with contractors who are looking for workers. Usually the men come first and their wives and children join later. If the worker and his family remain attached to a *thekedar* then they move with his group when he shifts from one construction site to another. The *thekedar* gets a cut from the daily wages of all workers, men and women. He also becomes the worker's point of contact in the city and while most *thekedars* squeeze the workers for cash, they also lend money to them in times of need and help them if there is an emergency. If the male worker is bound to his *thekedar*, the female worker is bound to both. Her husband follows the *thekedar*, and she, both. This category of construction workers again consists of two types – the cyclical and the permanent. The cyclical workers come to the city for a few months, work very hard to try and save money and return back to their villages during the harvest season or when they are needed at home. The permanent workers are those who have been living in the city for many years and do not go back to the villages often or at all. Besides the workers who accompany *thekedars* to the city, there are two more categories. First, there are more cyclical migrants who are employed directly by the contractor. These workers usually have family or village associates who are working in the city and are called over by them to avail employment opportunities. They are direct employees of the contracting company and pay no dues to the middlemen. The last category of workers is that set of migrants who have been working in the city for sometime and are not attached to any single construction site. They seek new employment frequently by collecting at Delhi's many labour *chowks* or crossings from where contractors looking for surplus labourers, hire them for the day. Recognizing the multiple categories of construction workers is important in order to understand why the data we have for them varies so much and why data collection in this sector can be challenging. While construction is included as a separate employment sector for main employment even in the national census, most of its workers are classified as unskilled labour. Hence, it would be more fruitful if the large category listed in these data sources as unskilled labour employment could be broken down to see how many of these workers are employed by construction. Because the categories of workers, their duration of work and their payment and contracting systems vary, the data on their numbers is not yet reliable, as it does not adopt such complexities in its classification.

Counting the number of women employed in Delhi’s construction sector is even more complex, since the women do not receive wages directly from the employer or the *thekedar*. Their husbands or fathers receive the money on their behalf every fifteen days of work done and they usually have no identity cards issued by the state welfare board for construction workers since most of them, like their male counterparts, are not registered. Hence, neither the welfare boards, nor the contractor’s muster rolls and wage books will have accurate information on women’s employment in the construction sector. Since the women do not receive their wages directly, there is no consensus at one construction site about the daily wage rate received by women engaged in the same line of work. The following table shows the ranges of wage rates encountered at two sites in Gurgaon and Dwarka respectively and the number of women receiving those wages.



All the wage rates represented in the table above are without payment for extra time and before the cut given to the *thekedar*. However, at the same site women employed in work of the same nature claimed that their wages are Rs. 145, Rs. 125 and Rs. 110. All these women are working under a *thekedar* and there is no correlation between number of years worked and the wage rate. Women who had been construction workers for ten years claimed to receive lesser wages than some women who had only been working for the last 6 months. The women workers say traditionally their husbands or fathers collected their share as well, hence their estimates about their own wages may not be accurate. Do their husbands give them

the money received on behalf of their labour? Yes, they have to give us most of it say the women as they are responsible for buying groceries for the family and other household items. Just as time can be relative, so is the concept of money. They calculate how much money they earn, require and save based on their expenses. Because their expenses are of a certain amount and that is what they tend to receive from their husbands, they estimate that must be their daily wage rate. As elaborated in Lakshmi's story, there is no question of depositing earnings in a savings account at a bank due to lack of access and also the fact that most women only receive as much money as is required for daily expenses from their husbands.

Women are employed at construction sites to do unskilled work of manual labourers. They are either responsible for sweeping, picking up and throwing away the rubble from the site. Many others assist *mistris* by carrying and handing out bricks, making the cement mix and passing it on to the craftsmen. Hence, no training is required for the kind of work they do. Most women are satisfied doing such work, but they do express the desire to learn skills so they may be qualified to do other jobs at the site or elsewhere. There are various reasons for expressing such a desire. Firstly, a labourers work is physically tough especially in Delhi's extreme weather conditions and the women complain of exhaustion from their work. Most of them work overtime for two hours at least beyond the stipulated time of 8 AM to 5 PM. In fact, on one site where the worker's homes were located almost 5 km. away, the company only had a drop facility available at 7 PM and not at the regular time of 5 PM. Hence, if a worker does not want to walk home after a hard day's work, they cannot not do so at 5 PM and continue working for two more hours. Secondly, they feel that once they are in their late forties and do not wish to continue doing construction work, they will have no supplementary skills to help them contribute to the family's income if required. Thirdly, in a large city like Delhi, they do not know where can they go to search for alternate employment or learn other skills. The only alternate option is to work in someone's home, but not everyone is happy with the salaries paid at these homes and they don't feel confident working alone in another family's house away from the security of their own and of their community. Chandni, a young labourer whose narrative will be elaborated later, worked at a family's home but was pulled out by her parents who no longer felt she was safe there and she too missed being with her family. While becoming a domestic help is the most common

alternative employment for women construction workers, it is not an option everyone is willing to experiment with. Fourthly, because women form the lowest strata of workers employed at the construction site, they feel their work does not receive much respect even though they are indispensable. They were used to being more respected in the village than at the construction site or in the city and they believe this problem stems from the fact that their work is not given any regard and their dependence on their husbands or fathers increases more in an urban setting due its vastness and lack of security and familiarity. Lastly, there are few women who did complete some formal education at the village and find their education and effort to have been a waste as they are compelled to do manual work at construction sites. Ahalya, a woman of twenty-four and a mother of a year old daughter had attended school till the tenth grade but could not clear matriculation. However, she can read and write in Hindi, knows some English and has basic mathematical skills. She expressed a strong desire to take up other work in the city where she would receive at least Rs. 110 daily and could make some use of her education.

Ahalya, like most other women did not come to Delhi from a village, but from the industrial city of Raigarh in Chattisgarh. Despite her inability to clear the tenth grade examination, she is very proud of her efforts to study despite a birth defect in her right leg that has left her slightly limping and became a topic for murmuring and pitying behind her back that left her feeling stigmatized as a child. Even today, she feels she might not get employed elsewhere because of her limp even though it is very minor. Ahalya's reasons for being distressed with her line of work go beyond the frustration with having to do unskilled manual labour. In the city, she has to live in a one room, tin roof *kuccha* shed with her husband and daughter at what is referred to in the industry as a "labour camp" by one and all. Labour camps are located on site or near a construction site and most workers and their families reside here in one-room temporary tin-shed huts. While the tin protects from the rain and the sun, some leakages aside, the bare earth floors become muddy and dusty often making it uneasy for families to sleep or sit on them. Hence, most of their time is spent outside the hut unless there is a downpour. Water stagnates as it cannot be pumped out or removed without any municipal services extended to these camps by the city or the employer. The stagnant water is the main cause for many water-borne infectious diseases that spread through these camps each year. For Ahalya who lived in a *pucca* house with

multiple rooms for living with attached bathrooms and a separate kitchen, having to live at a camp or even in an urban slum came unexpectedly and in her year in the city, she still has not adjusted to it. Having no separate bathing spaces for men and women and no functioning toilets at the construction site and the camp are perhaps the most frustrating for her and for the other women. To point out the difference between what was available in Raigarh compared to Delhi, she read out a whole list of missing amenities, “*Mere ghar mein fridge hai, rehne ke alag kamre, bathroom, kitchen, chaubees ghante bijli aur pani ka connection, aur mere paas asli sone ki angoothi, double paayal, chain, chudiyen aur baali.*” After she ran down her list I was curious to learn why she had moved to the city in the first place. She explained that her husband was a chauffeur at a private residence in Raigarh, but his uncle who had been working in construction for many years asked him to move to Delhi and work as a supervisor at a site. Since the pay was better than that of a chauffeur’s in Raigarh, they decided to make the move. Ahalya also began working so they could save more money and maybe move back some day. What they had not anticipated were the conditions under which they would have to live. In the beginning Ahalya had hoped that they would move to better accommodations as she was especially concerned about her daughter’s health, but to her horror her husband became addicted to alcohol in a matter of a few months. Now, she says anything they earn is never enough. A reason why she does not wear her jewelry like most other women at the site do, and has left it with her in-laws, is that she is afraid her husband will sell those too for the sake of the bottle. She blames the city for his vices and his refusal to listen to her pleading to control his alcoholism. The city does not allow the opportunity to break from routine work and life and compels many men and women to take up habits such as alcoholism, smoking and chewing tobacco. Missing one day’s work means earning a few hundred rupees that could buy household rations for a few days. Hence, one is forced to work all week long. If one does take a day off, it is spent settling the hut, spending time with children or relaxing. There is no time for recreation. Ahalya believes the routine working style of the city and the insult of living in such poor conditions drives many to take on desperate measures. When they lived in Raigarh, her husbands would have Sundays off and they would go for picnics or watch movies. Such recreational luxuries are entirely absent in the city for a construction worker, feels Ahalya. She had not imagined her marriage would see such a day.

Ahalya is not alone amongst the women who work at construction sites, in expressing her shock at the conditions under which they are made to work and live in the city. Women who have been moving from one construction site to another for the last ten years have never visited any recreational spaces in the metropolis or stepped in to a movie theatre. Their reasons are the same and they don't wish to push their husbands too far as they know they are always short of cash. Amongst the places they want to visit are the zoo, the Red Fort and Mathura and Vrindavan near by. Some even asked me if I would take them one day. Because they have not seen the city or felt comfortable with what it offers to them besides a daily wage, the women never refer to the city as their own. They always say "*hamara desh gaon hai*". The city's ways continue to shock them despite spending much time here and hence, it is a space that remains alien to them.

Physical security, both their own and of their children is another reason why they are afraid of the city. The women argue that if all women behaved decently and only focus on their work or path, they face no danger from men. But if women behave deviantly, then men lose respect for them and don't feel afraid to approach them. While feminists may argue that such a theory is untrue and men will continue to look at women as objects of desire irrespective of their behavior, on the ground the women working at a place with a much larger ratio of men don't agree. Lakkhi, who will be discussed later says she has never heard of men bothering any woman who stuck to her path and her work. At another end of the city, Sultana who came from Bengal unlike Lakkhi, also believes that it is up to the women to not show any signs of being vulnerable and to call all unknown men *dada* or *bhaiya*. While Lakkhi and Sultana's views match those of most other women, there have been stories at the construction sites of supervisors forcing some women and young girls to have sexual intercourse with them or assigning less strenuous work to women whom they find attractive in the hope of luring them. A supervisor at Mobile Crèches says there are women who work at the site and are also prostitutes on the side, since they are desperate to earn money for their families. Some of the women also supported the supervisor's claim and explained that these women usually have troubled households with either addicts for husbands or their own addictions and many mouths to feed. Their husbands are either unaware of their wife's activities or do not question it. Sometimes sexual relations with a person who is not your spouse is not for monetary reasons alone. Rashmi

Singh, who has been trying to organize construction workers currently employed at the buildings under construction at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, recounted a story of a married woman who had an affair with a man from another construction site till her husband found out and began ostracizing her in public. She had young children and did not wish to leave them. Eventually she lost contact with her lover hoping that her husband would take her in again. However, she had no such luck and could not even return to the village with her children, as no one would accept her there either. She lives near her husband's home and can only hope that he will forgive her, so her children can have a family again. For construction workers who are victims of sexual assault or have troubled families, there is no one to turn to for help in the city. Other workers who live in their camp or are from their district can only provide some comfort, but cannot intervene on their behalf. The routine of work is a necessity, but the battles in their personal lives are not something they factor in when they first come to the city. Unfortunately, even as the years pass on, the city provides no known mechanism for them to iron out their hardships without the prospect of a strained personal and family life.

Women at construction sites express the strains of their personal lives slowly and quietly and have no regrets because they say they have no other employment opportunity to turn to and living in the city in their condition is economically and emotionally hard, hence they say that they learn to live with the possibility of strain in their personal lives. Some find respite in the fact that at least their larger families remain in the village and they don't have to consult them while making their household decisions in the city, which would have only added to their burden of responsibilities. What these women are very vocal about and talk endlessly about are the blatant disparities in the city. Their "labour camps" get a few hours of water early in the morning and late at night, while the homes they help build have swimming pools where women bathe shamelessly wearing close to nothing, and running water flowing from their numerous taps. While they live in darkness and in the scorching summer heat, without any electricity, the *mahal* they help build has air-conditioners, lights and other appliances running twenty-four hours. While they must walk for kilometers in the heat to reach their place of work, every individual member of the houses they've built leaves each morning in their own separate cars. At smaller construction sites, there is no clean water available at all and not even few hours of

electricity. Construction workers claim that the individuals who inhabit these houses and buildings are not only richer, but have access to basic civic amenities that is the right of every citizen and they don't use these amenities as per their requirement, but instead misuse them by wasting more than consuming. If they can have access to enough water, electricity, transportation means that allows them to be wasteful, then why can't the labourers who work so hard to build their *mahal* or palace, have at least basic, everyday and reliable access to the same amenities? The workers feel betrayed by the public institutions and infrastructure of the city and by their employers for not providing them the civic amenities that they've been provided for even in their villages. To them, the lack of such provision is humiliating as they have no choice but to live in congested camps with one-room sheds, unclean tanks of stagnant water for bathing, unusable or no toilets and no garbage or sewage clearance. They cannot complain to their employers or move to another construction site, since all of them have similar or worse provisions for their workers. For the women who have to make the best of what they are given when they accompany their husbands coming to the city for employment, there is no love for the urban space. They say, the city may have given them their daily bread, but it has not offered them comfort or dignity. It is how it is, and they have no choice but to accept it.

Most Cherished, Most Unfortunate

For Lakkhi, her six children together constitute what is dearest to her in life. "I do everything only for the sake of my children", said Lakkhi when I asked her what motivated her to work as a construction laborer in Delhi from time to time. "Sirf apne bacchon ke liye" is the phrase she used to emphasize on the fact that it was *only* for her children that she continued to work as a brick and cement carrier at construction sites. Lakkhi estimates that she came to Delhi for the first time approximately ten years ago, when her husband found a job as a *mistri* at a building under construction. Even if there was work available in the village, said Lakkhi, it was better to move to the city as here her family was compelled to live off whatever money they made from their labor. If they had remained in the village, they would consume what they were earning from a laboring job as well as any money earned from selling produce grown on the fields. Being in the city, they at least saved what they received from the sale of crops. She had four children at the time out of which the two elder daughters remained in the village to continue their education at the local school. In order to

ensure that the family constituting of her husband, the younger children and she, had sufficient funds to survive in an expensive city, Lakkhi too began working at the site.¹ The family remained in the city for a few years and returned to the village when she became pregnant again. Since then, Lakkhi had accompanied her husband on a couple of more trips, however this particular visit was undertaken with the aim to make enough money to repay the loans they had taken to arrange for their eldest daughter's wedding. Out of the remaining five children, she left the older daughter and son with their grandparents in the village and brought with her to the city her twelve-year-old daughter, another younger daughter who was about seven and a son barely two years of age.

It is important to understand the trajectories of Lakkhi and her family's migration to the city in search of work, in order to begin looking at where her young children feature in this story of cyclical movements. Out of the three children who now live with Lakkhi in the city, her twelve year old daughter Varsha is a keen learner with an instinct for solving complex mathematical problems. On my visits to the crèche at the construction site, she would pester me to give her sets of math problems to solve and if I obliged she would only want more and asked me to make them as *kathin* or as difficult as possible. What is important here is not the difficulty of the problem that she could solve, but her eagerness to learn and to go to a school with children of her age and caliber. I asked Lakkhi why she wouldn't leave Varsha in the village so she may attend the local school or send her to a public school in the city. "Who will take care of my young son if I left her?" came the reply from Lakkhi. She acknowledged that Varsha was a bright girl, but her son was too young to be left alone at the crèche and also in their hut at the *labour camp* and her younger daughter was all of seven, hence she could not be given such a responsibility yet. Varsha claims she had attended school for seven years before accompanying her mother to the city after her eldest sister's wedding. Living in the city meant she had already lost

¹ Lakkhi's husband currently earns Rs. 200 for one day's work, while Lakkhi earns Rs. 125. Hence, if she works alongside her husband, their family's income increases by approximately 63%. The wage rates used here were given by Lakkhi herself, but it must be noted that she does not receive her wages directly from the contractor. Her husband is given both their salaries every fifteen days. Hence, all figures should be taken to be approximations as she expressed some uncertainty regarding her exact wages, since she was not paid directly.

a year of schooling and would lose more months of education unless her parents decided to leave her with her grandparents. She was scared to go to a school in the city as she feared being 'picked up' from the street by strangers and never seeing her family again.²

Varsha's condition is not unique among her peers. Many mothers bring their young teenagers to the city so that they may take care of their siblings while their parents are busy working. These children miss out on years of schooling and when they do go back to the village, they have to start from a lower grade again. In the case of young girls especially, parents tend to see them as care givers to their younger siblings and feel that their education can be compromised as opposed to a similarly aged boy. Not all parents uproot their teenage children from the village and keep shuttling them between the city and their hamlet. Chameli, a mother of three has left her older daughter and son with their grandparents, so they can attend school and live comfortably. Her youngest is only a year old, leaving no choice but to bring him to the city. She says she will never bring the older children to the city, even if she needs their help. To her the city is a shocking place and unsafe for everyone, hence she will not take a chance with her teenage children. Lakkhi and Chameli both have similar ambitions for their children, yet their situations are different and hence the choices they make with regards to the their children are also different. Lakkhi is now over forty and after giving birth to and taking care of six children, doing long periods of laborious work in the village and city as well as managing her household, she says she does not have the energy or the patience to look after her younger children without a helping hand. When she was younger, she claimed proudly, she too did not bring her eldest daughter to the city and the girl went on to study till was married at age seventeen. Chameli is about twenty-seven years and was married at the age of fifteen. She never went to school but always wished she had. Hence, till the time she can take

² A story that was popular amongst the women on this construction site, while I was doing my fieldwork, was that a teenage girl who had been walking along on the street outside the construction site one day had been forcibly pulled in or picked up by men traveling in a large vehicle. While some women denied the incident, calling it a rumor, the younger girls believed it to be true and were afraid to walk alone on the street.

care of her young alone, she too will not disrupt her older children's lives in the village and bring them to the city.

While crèche services are available at many of the large construction sites, not all children attend the crèche. On walking around the site, it is easy to spot children who are standing by and watching their parents work or playing with their friends across the length and breadth of the site and some even sleeping adjacent to the point where a parent is working. Not only are children spotted across the site, playing or idling, some even remain behind at the 'labour camps' while their parents go to work. Ganga, a labourer from Bilaspur has been coming to the city to work since she herself was a child. Her two children lay sleeping next to her as she swept a floor of the building under construction. On asking why she doesn't send them to the crèche at their site or to a school, Ganga said that her children don't want to attend school. She had tried to send them many times, but they always ran back to her. She says that she understands the importance of an education, but if her children don't wish to attend school then she cannot force them. There are many other women whose children don't attend a crèche or a school because they say that their minds are not bent towards studying.

A supervisor at the crèche on a site in Gurgaon explained that mothers nowadays willingly send their children to school, as they understand the importance of an education in order to secure better lives for their children. They want their children to have well-paying jobs and not have to work as labourers. Even a decade ago this was not the case. Most mothers were apprehensive about leaving their children at crèches and schools. They had been warned that the city is a dangerous place and feared that someone would pick up their child and run away while they were busy working. With more exposure to the media and with growing awareness campaigns on infant care, said the supervisor, the mothers have begun insisting on taking up work only at sites where crèche and school facilities are available. While this may be true, it is not always the case. Adolescent and teenage children can be spotted around the construction site and at the shelter facilities. Also, smaller construction sites found in areas such as Dwarka tend to not have crèche facilities. Mothers working at these sites say that they can only dream of sending their children to school – not only is there no crèche facility provided by the contractor, there is also

no school nearby and once again, the women are skeptical about allowing their children to walk alone to a school situated far away.

As a consequence of not being occupied at school, many children begin doing small chores at construction sites and eventually become absorbed in to the general labour force. I watched Bittu, a girl of seven standing by and observing her mother shovel up the rubble from a work site and load it onto another worker's head. Out of curiosity the little girl began doing the same when her mother's shovel sat idle. She felt that this was a way to help out. It is difficult to estimate how many children or adolescents begin working at construction sites because they live at these sites and may as well lend a hand to their parents and eventually contribute to the household income. The Census of India estimates there were over 10 lakh persons between the ages of 5 and 19 working in the construction sector across India in 2001.

Persons between 5-19 years employed in the construction industry in India					
Age	Total	Male	% of Total	Female	% of Total
5-9 years	11993	9230	76.96156091	2763	23.03843909
10-14 years	125944	100009	79.40751445	25935	20.59248555
15-19 years	920576	831783	90.3546258	88793	9.645374201

There is no available data yet to show that this number may have fallen in the last ten years. Also, this enumeration probably only includes children who are easily visible as workers at sites. There are many others who do not work for an income, but stay at home to help raise their younger siblings or look after the household. Many others like Bittu begin helping their mothers casually, while missing out on attending school. At sites near which no schools are established and parents are unwilling to leave their children in the village or send them far away to learn, children inevitably add to the existing labour force. Young girls are often employed at households nearby as domestic help. It is particularly difficult to collect accurate data for those aged between 15-19 years. Many between those ages hesitate to reveal their correct ages and in many occasions, parents too hide their ages for fear of being removed from the

construction site by a potentially strict contractor. However, it is not always impossible to guess the ages of many young workers as I soon discovered.

While I was talking to a pregnant worker taking an afternoon nap on a site at Dwarka, a young girl came and sat next to us, curious to hear our conversation. I assumed her parents worked there as well and she was here under the shade of the large building because the rains outside made it difficult for her to remain in their hut. Soon enough, I was proven wrong. She too was taking a break from work. I asked her how old she was and she refused to tell me. “Maa mana karti hai”, she said. Her mother had forbidden her to reveal her age. I asked her how long had she been working for. She couldn’t give me an exact number, but said roughly ten years. Before that she would take care of her younger brother who incidentally, had also begun work at that site. Over the last two years however, she had been working with a family of four who lived in an apartment building close by. Their security guard had approached some of the labourers for a maid for the family and her mother had offered to send Chandni. Working with the family was much better than working at the construction site. She got all her meals, a concrete floor and not the muddy earth to sleep on and cool air from the air conditioner to keep out the heat. Her wages however were given directly to her mother. Chandni says she had to leave because the family wanted to take her abroad with them for a few weeks and her parents were not comfortable with the idea. I asked her if she would work for them again when they returned to India. “Apne bhaiya aur mummy-papa ko bahut yaad karti thi”, she says and explains that while the work was less tiresome and the environment less harsher, she missed her family too much to live away from them. Chandni had never been to a school. Her parents had been moving from one construction job to another in the city and always lived at the worker’s camps on site, hence attending one school was never possible. Also, she felt it was her duty to help her parents. Her elder sister’s wedding had been arranged in the village recently and the family needed a fresh input of funds to pay off dues from the celebrations. Chandni hopes some day she will be married off similarly, as her sister doesn’t need to come and work in the city. She lives in a village near theirs and only has to fulfill her household chores. Hence, she doesn’t want to go to school even now, not even to learn how to read and write. I asked her how old she was once again. “Solah”, she told me quietly before her mother saw her and asked her to run and get food for her brother. At sixteen, Chandni can work as a

maid or a construction labourer, contribute to her household's income, take care of her siblings and parents and their chores. But she cannot read any alphabets or calculate any numbers.

The future and welfare of their children inspires many of the women I met to work as construction labourers. However, for many women, the conditions under which they are forced to live and work in the city compel them to make use of their child's labour. The children of cyclical migrants are disadvantaged as well since they are constantly uprooted from one place to another, missing out on school years and having to constantly adjust in new surroundings and with new people. The children who bear the brunt of these forces are young girls. Having to care for their siblings and the household, they have to give up the dream of studying in public schools or even village schools and as they enter their teenage years many still do join the ranks of the labour force working at construction sites or as domestic helps. They constantly fear separation from their parents as they don't feel secure in an alien urban environment and eventually it is for their weddings that their parents will have to continue earning more money through construction work and occasionally a sibling or two many also have to leave behind the dream of studying and contribute to the debt payoff.

The Tragedy of Poor Health Service Delivery

Perhaps the toughest institutional facility to avail if one is a migrant labourer in the National Capital Region, is healthcare. Lata, a construction worker from Bilaspur lost all her savings and had to borrow further money from the *thekedar* when her young daughter fell down from a raised concrete platform while playing at the construction site. Lata says she had warned her many times, but the child would not listen and after the fall she had to be hospitalized immediately. Since the child was not a construction worker and did not hurt herself due to any constructional mishap at that spot, the builders were not liable to help. Lata rushed to a private hospital nearby as the government facility would take more time to reach, and after that there have been more and more bills to be paid everyday. She is glad that her daughter could be saved, but she prays her family never has to see another hospital in the city, as they would not be able to bear the expenses again.

For women who begin working at construction sites, the fear of hurting themselves of falling sick from exposure to dust and chemicals remains constant, but they have no choice of staying away from work. Those who have been working in the industry for many decades say that some mechanization does reduce the burden of their work. Trucks can easily move around larger sites now and dump the cement and bricks closer to where they are required, as opposed to maintaining a common store area. So, women have to walk shorter distance with heavy loads on their heads. The fear of getting hurt remains and it is most when they are new to this line of work. The companies offer medical help and compensation when there is a major accident on the site. But, if workers fall sick or suffer from minor injuries they have to consult physicians and incur expenses out of their daily wages. Subhash Bhatnagar, of the Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangam in Delhi, claims that if a major accident does occur construction companies compensate the worker and his family for any expenses, but it is also a common practice in the industry to then fire that worker and the others who came along with him. Hence, concerns about general health remain on the minds of workers since any major accident or illness in their household results in loss of savings and further indebtedness, but the facilities and consultation available to them in the city are negligible.

The Building and Other Construction Workers' Act (BOCW) of 1996 orders that all construction sites must have first-aid facilities. However, no women working at the sites covered by this report had heard of any such facilities at their workplaces. The act also makes it mandatory that any establishment hiring more than ten construction workers at a time must comply with its clauses. Workers must be registered with the local welfare boards to which they are to make a small contribution. The boards are supposed to assist workers in case of medical emergencies including accidents and illnesses by helping them avail healthcare facilities and compensate for expenses incurred. Pregnant women are also supposed to receive maternity benefits. At both Gurgaon and Dwarka, none of the women had heard about the BOCW Act and nor did they know that they could get assistance regarding healthcare upon registration with the local welfare board.

Wearing any protective gear while working was conspicuous by its absence at the construction sites visited. The women were all dressed in sarees with their ornaments and religious markers of marriage in place. Most women wore footwear,

but many did not. Most of the younger children around the site would walk barefoot too. If a member of the household shows symptoms of an illness, he or she is taken to the clinic of a “Bengali Doctor” near the camp where workers live. In Gurgaon where many large construction sites are clustered together, there is a stretch of road lined on both sides by these “Bengali Doctors”. The clinics operated by these self-professed doctors consist of two small rooms. The inner room is where they check patients and the outer room functions as a office and dispensary. The men who occupy these clinics as doctors claim that they are registered medical practitioners, but had no documentation to show such a qualification. They advise women and their families on all their medical concerns. While their credentials remain dubious, according to Dr. Vandana Prasad of the Public Health Resource Network, the practitioners act as medical counselors to women and their children in a city where availability of medical consultation is either absent or very rare for poor labourers. The “doctors” admit that they are not capable of handling any serious illnesses and ask the women to travel to government hospitals if more elaborate medical care is required. Most of these practitioners came to Delhi from West Bengal or Chhattisgarh some six-seven years ago when they heard that there was a growing demand in their trade amongst migrant labourers.

While the “Bengali Doctors” offer a vital service to labourers who have poor access to any other primary institutional healthcare, their lack of detailed medical knowledge can also end up complicating the patient’s condition, than improving it. Dr. Prasad recalls that, she has seen practitioners prescribe women from construction sites medication without any direction regarding dosage and because these women tend to be illiterate, they end up administering wrong dosages to their children or to themselves. Hence, she says that in Delhi, the migrant workers face a dual burden regarding healthcare systems, as there is lack of dissemination of knowledge about preventive healthcare and access to healthcare infrastructure is poor. India has no urban health mission, that will recognize the pockets where investment in building health services capacity must be undertaken by the government and put a structure in place for facilitating knowledge and counseling about health. NGOs organize health camps and train and send health workers to areas where labourers live, but their capacity and scope are restricted. Dr. Prasad believes that unless an urban health mission that combines infrastructural capacity building and counseling, on the lines of

the existing rural health mission is articulated by the government, the poor who constitute one-third of the city of Delhi will continue to struggle to find decent healthcare facilities. The existing hospitals are completely overburdened as people from across the country come to access Delhi's medical facilities. But, the facilities are not even sufficient for the city's population. Many cases reported to hospitals require primary intervention and can be dealt with by properly trained health workers.

The provision of easy access to healthcare systems becomes crucial in the case of women construction workers, since the hazards to their health are greater from the environment in which they work. At sites covered in Gurgaon and Dwarka there was no provision for safe drinking water at both the place of work and camps of residence. Sanitation and hygiene are poor and no usable toilets have been constructed. Hygiene products for women are not easily available or too expensive as many women complain and there is no facility for their disposal. When women are menstruating, they feel embarrassed to ask for leave from the male supervisors as no female overseers are found at most sites. Many pregnant women continue to work at least six months in to their pregnancy and the supervisors don't prevent them from doing so. The women don't wish to lose out on supplementary income, hence they continue to work till they can manage. Regarding contraception, women complain that the men refuse to use condoms and the contraceptive pills are too expensive. Dr. Prasad who has worked with women doing construction work and their children for two decades now, says that there are still many myths associated with contraception, especially the pill, and the fear of shame about asking for and availing contraceptive solutions. Until the women feel empowered to ask their husbands to use condoms or use female contraceptives, they cannot restrict the number of children their household has. Children become the centre of these women's lives, but work and then managing the household and children leave them exhausted and undernourished as they tend feed their families well before eating what little is left of the day's ration. The "Bengali Doctors" also complain that all the women working at construction sites tend to have severe nourishment deficiencies and many of their illnesses stem from these. The lack of sanitation and hygiene at construction sites and "labour camps" results in seasonal diseases such as malaria, typhoid, dengue, dysentery, chikungunya spreading easily amongst the workers each summer and monsoon season. Regarding the penetration of infectious diseases such as AIDS, both the "Bengali Doctors" and experts such as Dr.

Prasad remain ambiguous. There have been very rare instances of testing for such diseases and if any positives have been identified, the organizations holding the tests have not gone back and informed the concerned worker. However, they have not yet heard about any women or men suffering from AIDS, but also the number of efforts to test and find out, have been negligible.

The story of Sultana, a pregnant construction worker from Bengal can help understand how the absence of accessible health services are negotiated by the poor and migrant in Delhi and how do they cope with the lack of what is considered a basic service. When I entered a building under construction at Dwarka, a young lady of about twenty-five lay asleep on a concrete block with her baby lying at her side. It was a hot and rainy day outside and both mother and child were resting under the shade of the building. When Sultana turned at the crack of thunder, I noticed that she was carrying another child in her womb. I smiled at her and she asked me sit down. She adjusted her worn out saree and took the child lying beside her onto her lap. “How many months to go?”, I asked her. Another 2-3 months perhaps she said, trying to approximate how long it had been since she had become pregnant. This would be her third child in seven years. Sultana’s village is in the Raiganj district of West Bengal, she tells me in Bengali – a language she is more comfortable with than the Hindi she must speak in Delhi. Will she give birth to her third infant in Raiganj then? She wishes that were possible. With two young children in tow and another one on the way, it was impossible for her to make the train journey back home. She would give birth in her hut at the “labour camp” located near the construction site. For help, her husband would call some older women from sites nearby. She says there is no need to go to a hospital for something so routine, yet she worries about the delivery. Her first two were born in the comfort of her home in the village, with her mother and other female relatives to help her. The local doctor had delivered her children, not an aunt or mid-wife. I asked her how old she is, and twenty-five she said it should be since she was married off at sixteen and her eldest son was about seven and he was born approximately two years after her wedding.

Sultana says she was very skeptical about coming to the city with her husband. She had grown up in the same district where she was later married and hence, she had her family and friends all at one place. In the city she had to live with people who were not even Bengali and hence had different habits from hers. Another aspect of the

city she has not been able to grapple with is the long distances. The nearest vegetable and meat market was about 5 kilometers away and very expensive. Fresh fish was a luxury and she had not eaten any since coming to Delhi. There were no doctors or health workers who visited their construction site or could be found nearby either, hence access to any medical practitioner was difficult. She hoped that she would not need a doctor at the time of delivery, as her husband would really have a tough time getting her to a hospital and then taking care of the older children. Sultana had been in and out of Delhi for the last five years. When she was not these many months pregnant she continued work on the construction site carrying bricks. “One person’s income is not enough to sustain a family in the city”, she said as a way of explaining her own choice to work.

The Government of Delhi has implemented the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) program, but only families below the poverty line can apply for these smart cards. With the poverty line set at a daily earning of Rs. 21 per day, most construction workers cannot avail this service. Also, in the case of construction workers, accessing these smart cards becomes problematic as they are not registered citizens of the state of Delhi, which is not going to provide insurance to residents registered as citizens of other states in India. If migrant workers are doubly burdened with regards to accessing knowledge and infrastructure about their health, then the women amongst them suffer the most. Managing pregnancies, childbirth and keeping their children healthy, along with working at construction sites, managing the household and negotiating a life without support systems in the city, becomes possible at the cost of their own physical health. And, the women say they cannot complain, as they have no alternative to this lifestyle.

Protection by the Law, Negligence of the Law

There is no absence of legal frameworks, under the aegis of which the working and living conditions of all construction workers can be improved. In fact, there is a plethora of laws. The problem on the ground is that the people for whose benefit and welfare these laws have been framed, are not aware of them. None of the women I met had any knowledge of the legal requirements their employers are meant to comply with and hope and claim that their husbands or *thekedars* must know. It is almost unthinkable for them that the state and the contractors, could possibly have

any legal obligations towards the workers, especially the women. Their ignorance can be taken as proof of the fact that the state and its institutions have had such negligible interaction with women construction workers. The women know about the police and the courts, but of no law that guarantees them any rights as workers. Such an information gap can only be termed tragic, if one actually scrolls down the list of laws in the Indian constitution that have been drafted to ensure basic standards of work and residential conditions for construction workers.

The Building and Other Construction Worker' (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act (BOCW) of 1996, is the central legislation concerning labour welfare in the construction sector. The law makes it compulsory that any infrastructural or other construction activity where more than ten workers are employed at any time must follow the guidelines set by it. Firstly, all employers in the sector must register their projects with a concerned registering officer. Secondly, all workers employed at these projects must be registered and receive benefits provided by a board and a fund set up under this act. The workers have to register with individual state welfare boards, for which lengthy forms must be filled up and documents for identification must be provided, the overall cost of which is supposed to come to not more than Rs. 50. Activist-researchers such as Rashmi Singh, who has been trying to help register construction workers at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, complains that these forms are extremely detailed and very lengthy, making it impossible for a mostly illiterate worker to fill it out herself. Hence, volunteer registration is very rare. Also, only worker between the ages of 18 and 60 can be registered, which leaves out a large section of workers who below 18 and hence, more vulnerable to exploitation.

Upon registration, the board gives an identity card to the worker after which she can avail benefits from this membership. However, at both Gurgaon and Dwarka, where the fieldwork for this paper was carried out, I did not come across any registered workers. The worker then must pay a stipulated sum of money to the board as directed by a committee of that state, and this money is used to create a fund for the workers' welfare. The Construction Workers' Welfare Board thus created, is meant to assist workers in case of an accident, provide pension, insurance, meet medical expenses if the worker or his dependent suffers from a major illness, provide financial assistance for children's education, give maternity benefits to workers who are

pregnant and provide further guidelines to contractors for the welfare of workers. Hence, the welfare boards have been created to provide assistance to workers and act as a counsel, but till date these boards have done very little or no work to help their beneficiaries, says Subhash Bhatnagar who has taken up the task of registering every construction worker across the country. The states which have powerful and well-connected construction sectors, such as Delhi and Maharashtra have welfare boards that practically don't perform at all and have collected a welfare fund, but give out no benefits since the rate of registration and then claiming benefit is so poor.

The board is also meant to fix the hours of work and ensure that companies provide at least one day of rest during the week. Any woman working at a construction site in Delhi will tell you, these points are never adhered to. For any overtime work or working on a day off, the worker is entitled to twice her normal wage rate, which is again a benefit only found in law but not in practice. Facilities that employers are meant to ensure at the work site included regularly maintained registers for all workers, which is normally the practice but these registers are kept secret so it is difficult to check whether they are accurately maintained. Payment of regular wages, drinking water, not just any water, suitable toilets connected to sewage systems, temporary living accommodation with separate cooking, bathing, washing and lavatory facilities, crèches, first-aid kits, canteens and safety guidelines are to be provided by employers, but are mostly conspicuous by their absence. Inspectors are to be appointed to ensure all sites are complying with the given regulation, however Mr. Bhatnagar claims that his organization is often the one doing the work of these inspectors or has to be after them to raid sites where workers are being exploited. Non-compliance with these standards are punishable at civil courts, however such legal action has rarely been taken. The Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Cess Act, of 1996 is a supplementary to the BOCW Act and it stipulates the payment of 2% of the total construction cost by any builder, private or public, to the workers welfare board. Anyone who fails to do so can be punished with imprisonment. Hence, welfare boards have enough funds available as all construction projects in their area have to pay them 2% of their total cost, which can be a lot of money in the case of medium-large construction projects. However, very little of that is passed on to workers who have firstly, registered with their welfare board.

Both Rashmi Singh (2010) and Subhash Bhatnagar, are in concurrence that registering workers with their welfare boards is their best chance of availing the benefits made mandatory under the BOCW Act. Because construction workers are spread out across the urban expanses, move frequently and come from different states, a traditional union movement will not be effective in trying to organize them. Also, construction workers are skeptical about joining such movements when they don't feel that they are citizens of the city since their identification papers are from their own states and hence, they fear being thrown out if the union movement goes beyond their control and they lose their jobs. Rashmi Singh noticed the lack of support trade unions operating at JNU received from construction workers for espousing their cause. She also felt that these unions focus on the macro picture which the worker does not understand and forget the micro issues that actually affect the workers and their families. Hence, registration with welfare boards, although complex and usually not beneficial due to bureaucratic laziness and corruption, is the only hope for helping construction workers achieve the legal rights allotted to them, but not yet implemented by government or businesses.

While the BOCW Act is the central legal document for ensuring the welfare of construction worker, there are several other laws in the Indian Constitution, that make workers' welfare, even in this industry, legally binding. These include, Contract Labour Act, 1970, Employee Provident Fund and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952, Maternity Benefits Act, 1961, Minimum Wages Act, 1948, Payment of Wages Act, 1936, Personal Injuries (Emergency Provisions) Act, 1962, Employees Liability Act, 1938, Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923, Industrial Disputes Act, 1948, Contractor's Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970. However, the implementation of these just like that of the BOCW Act, remains poor and in some cases completely absent, as women workers have narrated in their continued experiences of hardship, exploitation and humiliation.

Conclusion

The woman construction worker's experience of working and living in the city of Delhi, is fraught with difficulties. Lack of financial control, despite being an earning member of the family, lack of knowledge and information about rights and about the city, leave the women burdened and vulnerable. Yet, these women don't

complain about their situation as loudly or as much as one in their situation can imagine. “*Ab jaisa hai, us se hi kaam chalana padega. Hum gareeb log hain, aur koi raasta nahin hai.*” These words are most commonly heard by women who want to make the most of what they have been allotted, despite their continued hardships and the loss of the dream of a settled and comfortable life.

There are a few women who have made the transition from being a dependent construction worker, to someone more independent and empowered. I met two during the course of the fieldwork. Rabiya, a construction worker at one time now runs a general store at a “labour camp” and is also employed by the construction company as a guard to maintain order amongst the workers who live there. She stopped construction work some fifteen years ago and first became a security guard. She received better wages at this position and also more respect. Recently, she had invested some of her own money in opening a general store, but a fire broke out while she was sleeping and burnt down her store and all her possessions. She had over forty thousand rupees saved under mattress that was burned. All her life’s savings were lost, as any money she had stored at a bank had all been used by her children for her grandchildren’s welfare. She had no insurance and the company has also refused to help her rebuild her store or receive treatment for her burns. Rabiya had liberated herself from the burden of dependency on employers, male members of the family and *thekedars*. She blames the city for not taking care of her now, after so many years of service. But, she can’t go back to the village either as she has been away for too long and will find her hamlet suffocating. She continues her work as a security personnel, but has lost all hope. The city busy transforming itself into a ‘world-class’ space has no support mechanism for Rabiya, who is uneducated and does not understand the complexities of the legal system and is now afraid of falling into depression.

Surina came to Delhi with her husband from Bihar, as he looked to work as a *mistri* at a construction site. She noticed how most of the women accompanying their husbands also became unskilled workers at the site. She found the prospect of doing such work uninviting and stayed for many months at their hut in the “labour camp” without employment. However, with two young children and an expensive city, she realized that their household could use extra income. She found work as a guard at the camp, but didn’t like that either. Then, a teacher at Mobile Crèches met her and

offered to train her in the work of assisting at the crèche. Surina began enjoying working with young children and since then, has been working at crèches operated by Mobile Crèches. She doesn't want to live at the "labour camp" for the sake of her children who attend a public school and are distracted by other children who don't attend any educational facility. But, any other accommodation is too expensive, so she has no option for the time being. Surina explains that her parents-in-law were never in favour of her doing construction work, hence unlike other women who accompany their *mistri* husbands to the city, she had the option of not becoming a labourer and waited to look for other opportunities. Such opportunities are not easily available she says, and many women can't wait before starting work.

If there is an opportunity to learn some skills or take up jobs that are less hazardous, strenuous and have a safer environment, women are willing to move out of the construction industry. Their relation to this building frenzy is of desperation, and they are resigned to doing labouring work. While they were prepared for hard work when they came to the city, what they were not ready to face was a new system of oppression and dependence. Unlike the village, where they have to work as per the wishes of their in-laws and extended family, here they are muted by the burden of balancing an eleven hour work day, managing their home and bringing up their children along with other possible concerns of health, addiction, abuse and mistreatment. Here they have to compromise on their own nutrition, on recreation, on rest and sometimes even on the possibility of not being able to give their children a future different from their own condition. The city, its people and its institutions do not help them progress, but keeps them where they are, maintaining their invisibility. The law makes lofty ideals for the industry and city to implement, but fails miserably as its word only remains an ideal and is yet to be seen working on the ground. And it is impossible to know how many such migrant women live within the capital city, as there is no reliable estimate of their numbers. Because they are migrants and muted, they are ignored, and they don't feel that they belong either here or at home. They build this 'global-city' but do not understand how it can ever be magnificent if it does not grant them basic rights and services. The city is able to maintain its status quo, as long as it denies them a voice. It could either wait for the day they begin to make themselves heard, or become more vigilant towards improving their condition, implementing already created laws and give their dues to the women who are so

integral to the sustenance of the city's dream of itself, women who play the many roles of worker, mother, wife and householder.

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