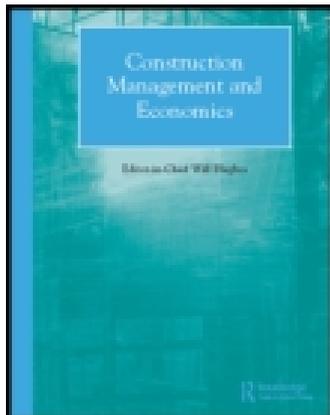


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Publisher: Routledge

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Construction Management and Economics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcme20>

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Published online: 01 Feb 2013.

To cite this article: Tanzina Choudhury (2013) Experiences of women as workers: a study of construction workers in Bangladesh, *Construction Management and Economics*, 31:8, 883-898, DOI: [10.1080/01446193.2012.756143](https://doi.org/10.1080/01446193.2012.756143)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01446193.2012.756143>

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Experiences of women as workers: a study of construction workers in Bangladesh

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Received 27 May 2012; accepted 30 November 2012

In Bangladesh, women's mobility is culturally constrained and women need to negotiate with patriarchy in order to join the male dominated labour market outside the home. A large number of men continue to be highly resistant to women's paid employment, partly because of the social norm of *purdah* and partly because they tend to consider it a shameful reflection on their ability as breadwinners, and hence on their masculine identity. While surmounting these constraints, women enter into full-time paid employment. However, the treatment of both men and women is not equal and this is particularly so in the construction sector. Thus, engaging in paid employment is not an easy decision to make and once women eventually join the labour force they experience mixed outcomes. It appears that paid work, on the one hand, confers on women greater economic autonomy and mobility and, on the other, exposes them to different sorts of deprivation and exploitation. In investigating these issues, the narratives of female construction workers were used to describe their experiences.

Keywords: Bangladesh, female construction worker, patriarchy, poverty, work experiences.

Introduction

How do women experience paid employment? There is a longstanding debate as to whether paid work acts as an emancipatory factor for women or exposes them to further exploitation and deprivation. Since the 1970s, when Ester Boserup's (1970) path-breaking book *Woman's Role in Economic Development* was published, women's incorporation into paid employment and income generation initiatives has come to the forefront in development discourse as a means to emancipate them and enhance their status. Lack of awareness of women's issues in processes of development has been a concern for many feminists and gender analysts (Tinker, 1990; Gordon, 1996; Connelly *et al.*, 2000). In line with this concern, many feminist organizations, government bureaux and development agencies continued to reflect on the provision of jobs for women as a fundamental way of integrating them into the development process (Pearson, 1998). Liberal feminists and many women's organizations tend to believe that women's subordinate position stems largely from a lack of job opportunities, which can

thus be redressed by creating opportunities for paid employment (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Bandarage, 1984; Elson and Pearson, 1984; Pearson, 1998, 2007). In conjunction with this emphasis on more positive outcomes of paid employment for women, a number of researchers, on the other hand, have shed important light on the negative aspects of women's participation in the labour force and reached rather more pessimistic prognoses. For them, paid employment may lessen one form of women's subordination within the home, yet it causes them to encounter more exploitative and vulnerable circumstances in the public domain. Studies (e.g. Edgren, 1982; Kung, 1983; Ward, 1988; Young, 1988; Pearson, 2000; Kabeer, 2008) conducted across the globe reveal that women often face gender based sexual harassment, deprivation and segregation in the workplace. However, women's work experiences may vary depending on their location and position in the labour market. Women's experiences regarding paid employment seem to have a direct relationship with their status in the society within which they live. In a society where women's engagement in paid work receives positive

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attention, women obviously find their work more rewarding. Conversely, in societies where women's participation in the labour force is restricted by the norms of seclusion and reflects negatively on the status of women and their family members, women may not take as much pleasure in it. In this article I will investigate the work experiences of Bangladeshi female construction workers who are situated at the lowest strata of the society and whose entry into the labour market generally does not offer an optimistic prospect. This study was conducted in 2010, in Sylhet, Bangladesh and evaluates these accounts in the context of existing social science, feminist, gender and development literature.

Context of the study

Bangladesh is a South Asian country with a population of nearly 150 million, a little less than half of whom (49%) are women (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2009). It is a less developed country where 40% of the total population lives in extreme poverty and again among this 40%, the condition of women is further marginalized as Bangladeshi women have very limited access to productive resources (Ahmed, 1991; Amin, 1997). In Bangladesh men are undoubtedly located as powerful within the social system and it is expected that the social norm is also in favour of male supremacy in both the private and the public domains (see Hearn, 1992). In congruence with the societal norms of Bangladesh, the statistics reveal that the country has one of the lowest female employment rates in the world. In Bangladesh, the economically active population is approximately 57 million, of which only 17 million are women (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011). This figure reflects the fact that women constitute a small fraction of the total labour force. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the country's constitution guaranteed equal rights to both women and men and the government also took additional measures to enhance the status of women in society by adopting the Women in Development (WID) vocabulary in both policy and legislative contexts.

The post-independence Bangladesh government reserved 10% of the positions in the civil service for women to ensure their participation in government services (Choudhury, 2000). The government also established a separate ministry of women's affairs in Bangladesh in 1978 making it the first South Asian country to take such an initiative. Nevertheless, women could not take full advantage of the opportunities created for them. The position of women vis-à-vis men in terms of numbers in

government jobs remains relatively insignificant. In fact, the vast majority (87%) of employed Bangladeshi women are engaged in the informal sector of the economy despite the efforts of the government to incorporate them into mainstream, formal sector jobs (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Moreover, statistics reveal that the number of women in the informal sectors is growing fast, while their proportion in the formal sector of the economy is decreasing. The informal sector in Bangladesh mostly draws poor women seeking employment into the lowest status and lowest paid sectors. Within the informal sector the construction industry has recently emerged as one of the most prominent employers, with an annual growth rate of almost 11%, alongside a corresponding increase in female labourers in this sector (see Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2009). As mentioned above, in the highly gender stratified society of Bangladesh women are over-represented as labourers but overwhelmingly under-represented as professionals; this is also the reality for the construction sector. Within a global context, the construction sector is demonstrably male dominated; women wishing to further their careers in the construction sector in the West usually require vocational training in a related field such as engineering, management and so on (Gale, 1994). These professions are perceived as masculine professions and as such continue to be heavily male dominated (Dainty *et al.*, 2000, 2001). Bangladesh proves to be no exception as is clearly reflected by the numbers of female students in engineering and science disciplines. The most recently available statistics (2005–06) reveal that only 0.30% of Bangladeshi employed women have an engineering, technical, vocational or medical degree (Akmam, 2004; Islam and Sultana, 2006; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Anecdotally most of the women who study engineering or other 'masculine disciplines' seldom further their professional careers in these fields. Whether they do so and how they experience the male dominated professional environment are interesting issues. However, this study is particularly concerned with the poor Bangladeshi women who are employed at the lowest tier of the construction sector. Though it is argued that in developed countries such as the UK, the USA and Canada the construction sector is segmented along gender lines and women in this sector encounter discrimination, I posit that their experiences are not directly comparable to those of many poor third world female construction workers (see Dainty *et al.*, 2000; Byrne *et al.*, 2005; Powell *et al.*, 2009; Baruah, 2010). In developed countries women engaged in the construction sector are typically trained and skilled professionals. As to the relatively few non-professional female construction workers, the

work carried out by them bears relatively little resemblance to the hazardous and gruelling work of their female Bangladeshi counterparts (see Baruah, 2010; Parveen and Patil, 2010). In less developed economies (e.g. Bangladesh, India) women are exclusively involved at the bottom layers, constrained as they are by their lack of formal education and demonstrable marketable skills (Kabeer, 2008; Barnabas *et al.*, 2009). Most of the research (Sommerville *et al.*, 1993; Dainty *et al.*, 1999; Powell *et al.*, 2009; Agapiou, 2002; Lingard and Lin, 2004) conducted in the West on women involved in the construction sector primarily deals with the predicaments faced by educated middle class professionals in a male dominated field. Poor women without any formal training or education engaged in physically demanding construction work in the global South have received little attention. I contend that these women's experiences are equally worthy of in-depth attention in the field of academia.

As mentioned earlier, despite the initiatives of the Bangladeshi government, women's ability to capitalize on their labour power continues to be constrained by the norm of female seclusion and by their domestic obligations (Kabeer, 1988; Feldman, 1992; Kabeer, 1994; Amin, 1997; Kabeer, 2008; Sweetman, 2009). These constraints are, over the years, institutionalized through marriage. In patriarchal Bangladesh the marital contract is based on the social ideal of male as breadwinner/guardian and female as dependent and secluded. This dominant ideal forms a key social relationship in the lives of adult men and women (Mazumdar and Sharma, 1990; Kabeer, 1991; Dube, 1997). Similar findings were also observed in studies conducted elsewhere (see Hearn, 1999; Connell, 2005; Morell and Swart, 2005; Pease, 2009; Qayum and Ray, 2010).

Thus, in Bangladesh paid employment for women is more often considered an option, and not necessarily one that reflects positively on their husbands and families (Safa, 1995; Kabeer, 2008). Though many upper and middle class people no longer adhere to the ideology that women's engagement in paid employment necessarily has a negative association with the family's status, poor people still seem to hold the notion that women's entry into the labour force reflects on the image of the man of their respective households as an incapable breadwinner and provider for his dependants. Kabeer (2000) observed that women who belong to very poor households do not possess much decision making power over whether or not they engage in paid work outside the home.

It continues to be the case that many men still do not readily allow their wives to join the workforce. Many men who subscribe to the traditional ideology

tend to believe that entering into paid work is an 'aberration' for women (Seidler, 1997, p. 51). There is continued resistance to women's paid employment partly because of the social norm of *purdah* (see Kabeer, 2000) and partly because men tend to consider it a shameful reflection on their ability as breadwinners, and hence on their masculine identity. In addition, women's entry into paid employment tends to be comprehended by many men as a powerful threat to patriarchal dominance over women, and many fear losing unconditional control over 'their' women (Gordon, 1996).

However, the situation is gradually changing. In Bangladesh as a whole, large numbers of women seeking paid employment outside the home is one of the most widespread trends. Women of well-off families are taking paid employment as new opportunities have been opened up with the changing global scenario (White, 1992). Women from poorer households, on the other hand, are coming out of their homesteads to engage in paid work as growing impoverishment is no longer allowing them to rely on the 'patriarchal bargain' (Kandiyoti, 1988), where women often forgo economic independence in exchange for deference (White, 1992; Kabeer, 1997; Feldman, 2001).

Over the last 30 years, women's participation in the labour force has expanded beyond the family farm enterprise to the global market economy; the new form of urban employment in the export-oriented garment industries is a glaring example of this fact (Kabeer, 1988; Kibria, 1995; Salway *et al.*, 2003, p. 881; Halim, 2004). Poor landless women, most of whom lack educational attainments and formal skills, are, however, not generally deemed suitable for employment in the expanding garment sector labour force. Even so, work opportunities for them in the public sphere have opened up. While educated women may have extended their share of jobs in the formal sectors, poorer women continue to be disproportionately represented in a few casual and low status female stereotyped economic activities at the informal end of the labour market (see Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Women on the threshold of extreme poverty take whatever paid work is available to them. Construction work is one such area of informal sector employment. Lack of such skills leads them to take the least desirable informal sector jobs where women are poorly paid or paid in kind, which seems to be the outcome of the influence of existing social norms and practices (Kabeer, 2008). Patriarchal societal norms often consider women's income as secondary and therefore unnecessary (Wolf, 1991). There is a widespread belief that men need an income to support a family, while women do not (Elson and

Pearson, 1981, 1984; Kabeer, 2008). The continuation of 'the myth of the male breadwinners' perpetuates the secondary status of women in the labour market (Safa, 1995).

Some studies conducted in Bangladeshi context, on the other hand, suggest that women's participation in paid work means they will have increased access to information and support networks (Amin *et al.*, 1997) and increased feelings of self-worth (Salway *et al.*, 2005, p. 319).

It is, therefore, evident that paid employment outside the home has a mixed impact upon the lives of women (Feldman and McCarthy, 1983). The article investigates this complex dual process of positive and negative experiences of female construction workers in Bangladesh.

Women's experience as workers in theoretical literature

The main objective of this study is to understand the work experience of female construction workers in the patriarchal society of Bangladesh. In order to explain the discrimination and exploitation that the female construction workers encounter in the gender segregated, male dominated public sphere, I draw on different theoretical explanations such as Hirschman's (1970) 'voice/exit' and in addition to this sociological theory I draw on feminist and gender and development analyses such as Safa's (1984) research on Puerto Rican women, Walby's (1997) analysis of patriarchy, and Young's (1988) 'sex stereotyping' to explain female construction workers' experiences in the public sphere. Gender relations experienced by female construction workers in Bangladesh cannot be adequately explained with a single theoretical perspective. I thus draw on multiple theoretical analyses to explore and explicate differing aspects of these gender relations.

Walby (1997), providing an analysis of patriarchy in Western contexts, distinguishes between two main types: private and public. Walby (1997) maintains that due to the increased demand for women's labour, a transformation is taking place from a private to public form of patriarchy.

This [private and public] may be more elegantly described as more domestic and more public regimes. The domestic gender regime is based upon household production as the main structure and site of women's work activity and the exploitation of her labour and sexuality and upon the exclusion of women from the public. The public gender regime is based, not on excluding women from the public, but on the

segregation and subordination of women within the structures of paid employment and the state, as well as within culture, sexuality and violence [...] In the domestic form the principal patriarchal strategy is exclusionary, excluding women from the public arena; in the public it is segregationist and subordinating. (Walby, 1997, p. 6)

Although Walby (1997) captured the patriarchal scenario of different social contexts, the situation of Bangladeshi women fits with Walby's (1997) explanation of the domestic gender and public gender regimes. In line with Walby (1997, p. 7), I argue 'the transformation from a private to public form of patriarchy' is not sufficient to change women's status in a gender stratified society like Bangladesh. In her more recent writings Walby (see Walby, 2011) uses the terms private and public *gender regimes* instead of private and public *patriarchy*, but argues that these terms are interchangeable. However I would prefer to continue to refer to private and public patriarchy in this article as I feel that these terms explain the context of Bangladeshi society more precisely.

Hirschman (1970) highlighted that the capacity for 'voice' is closely related to the ability to 'exit' inauspicious situations or abusive relationships. The 'exit' option depends on a wide range of factors, particularly the strength of the actors' fallback position. Independent access to material resources on the part of the actors is important in shaping 'exit' options. However, cultural norms of Bangladeshi society do not support women to break marital ties even when women are in abusive relationships or other unbearable circumstances. Many women hardly have an opportunity to choose the option of 'exit' either from the family or from employment. The gender stratified nature of the job market and cultural ideology of the society usually weaken women's fallback position. Under these circumstances, it is difficult for women to bargain with patriarchal systems and, to draw on Hirschman (1970), raise their 'voice'. Patriarchal society places women in a disadvantageous situation in both the home and the workplace.

In patriarchal Bangladesh a woman's bargaining power outside the household also tends to be affected by sex stereotyping. Kate Young's (1988) analysis has highlighted the sex stereotyping of the labour market. According to Young (1988), 'sex stereotyping' is a common mechanism of exclusion and it appears to work in such a way that women may exclude themselves from certain types of work. Agarwal (1997) observes that male macro power and patriarchal structures of society devalue women's work and as a result women in the workplace encounter wage discrimination alongside other problems.

Safa's (1984) research on Puerto Rican women focuses on the way gender ideologies govern the position of poor women both in the family and in the workplace:

the contribution they make in terms of paid employment still tends to be minimized. Women of working class families still tend to be seen as supplementary wage earners, dependent on men as the primary breadwinners. This 'supplementary' role has been used to justify the continued inequality in wages for men and women, as well as occupational segregation in low-paying, unskilled jobs in the manufacturing, clerical and service sectors. (Safa, 1984, p. 1168)

Similarly, according to Mackintosh (1984, p. 4), societies structured on the basis of gender are inclined to express, embody and perpetuate female subordination. She goes on to say that in the realm of paid work, women tend to be segregated in certain low paid, lower status occupations and they are also more likely to be defined as 'less skilled'. As mentioned before, Bangladeshi society is patriarchal and the society tends to be characterized by the practice of female seclusion (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004). In such a society, it is more likely for the labour market to be more sex stereotyped. I argue that Bangladeshi women's position appears to fit with this explanation as the majority of the women engaged in paid employment in the public sphere are suffering from various sorts of discrimination in a gender segregated society. My analysis suggests although there are many women who are the sole or the principal breadwinner of the family, they are generally perceived as 'supplementary' earners in patriarchal Bangladeshi society. Such sex stereotyping shrinks women's claim in both the family and the workplace, and subsequently perpetuates their subordinate status. The patriarchal ideology of society tends to uphold the myth of the male breadwinner. Women also generally fall into the trap of such propaganda partly because of their internalized values and partly because of their relative lack of overt agency in a gender segregated society.

According to Elson and Pearson (1981, 1984), the secondary position of women is not a mere reflection of 'patriarchal attitude'. It is not simply that people just cannot recognize women's contribution and attribute a lesser value to women's gender roles, nor is it a straightforward belief that it is right and proper for women to accept a secondary position. Rather, as Elson and Pearson (1984, p. 25) suggest, 'this process of subordination of women as a gender can be understood in terms of the exclusion of women as a gender from certain activities and their confinement to others'.

I argue that the patriarchal nature of Bangladeshi society strengthens the process of sex stereotyping and effectively labels women as 'less skilled' and 'supplementary' earners to downgrade them to a secondary position in the public sphere. While women may be fully aware of their subordinate status, their relatively weak fallback position means that they have restricted opportunities to raise their 'voice' or espouse the 'exit' option.

Thus, in Bangladeshi society women's mobility, in general, is seriously restricted: the *pardah* system is highly valued; men tend to have power and authority over women's lives and labour; and their position is clearly subordinate to men. However, I am not suggesting that patriarchy in Bangladesh is monolithic and unyielding; indeed, patriarchal control and women's resistance to such control is influenced by specific context and personal circumstances. I nevertheless argue that forms of patriarchy continue to be pervasive in the context of Bangladesh. I am adopting the concept as it was used by Kandiyoti (2000, p. 147), who argued 'Bargaining with patriarchy represented an uneasy compromise since it suggested that contestation and resistance were possible but always circumscribed by the limits of the culturally conceivable'. In such a societal system, how do the women of the poorest strata of the society who are involved in physical labour encounter the male dominated outside world? How do they negotiate with their male co-workers? How do they face their near and dear ones? In this study, I try to deal with these issues using the accounts provided by female construction workers in Sylhet city to explore in greater detail some of the conceptual issues highlighted above.

Profile of the participants

The female labour force in the construction sector is a diverse group in terms of demographic characteristics. In order to obtain a broader picture of female construction workers' experiences my study incorporated women who belonged to different age groups, ranging from early 20s to mid-50s. Twelve female construction workers were selected as participants from two construction workers' congregating points of Sylhet city. These two meeting points were selected because of the heavy concentration of both male and female construction workers. Participants were selected purposively and this selection procedure was guided by the criteria of participants' place of origin, age, marital status, religion, willingness to talk to me and the availability of adequate data. The exact number of female construction workers was not known so probability sampling was not possible.

However, I was not concerned about this as I did not seek to test a statistical hypothesis: the aim of this study is the in-depth qualitative exploration of the nature of workplace experiences for a group of women, which has not hitherto been explored in such depth. The necessary data regarding the participant female construction workers were collected through a combination of different instruments such as life histories, ethnographic observation and secondary sources. Notes were taken during the fieldwork period. The majority of life histories lasted for six to seven hours over the course of several repeated sessions, were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Of the 12 participants, 33% lived in households which are headed by husbands and are therefore perceived as more conventionally structured. Fewer than 17% of the participants' husbands had been living in their village homes. Twenty-five per cent of the participants were widowed and another 25% had been deserted by their husbands; all of them were living with their children and assumed the responsibility of household headship after the death, departure or absence of their husbands.

All of the participants were migrants from rural areas and were from different parts of Bangladesh. A pattern emerged regarding the economic activities of the construction workers prior to joining construction work. Fifty per cent worked for wealthy households mostly to carry out post-harvest activities; sometimes they worked as domestic helpers to do the regular household chores such as cleaning, washing, fetching water from nearby ponds or tube-wells, grinding spices, taking care of the livestock and so on. Most of these women did not receive any cash for their services and instead received food or paddy as wages. Nearly 17% of them worked as casual wage labourers even before they had migrated and joined the construction sector. Although women generally do not work in the public sphere as it is seen in some social contexts to bring shame on the family, their sense of propriety conceded defeat in the face of abject poverty. Participant women's narratives also revealed that migration to a new social milieu facilitated their entrance to the construction sector and released them from any disapproval they would otherwise have received from their acquaintances back home.

Most of the participants' families were from the impoverished, landless sectors of rural Bangladesh. Their families' income levels were low and the principal breadwinners engaged in manual labour. Some of the women I spoke with arrived in Sylhet with the specific intention of joining the workforce. Others had migrated into the city with their husbands and only

after arriving in the city had they decided to join the labour force.

Thus the entry of these women into the public domain in search of paid work was directly and overtly associated with serious economic need. There was one group of women for whom earning activity was a matter of basic daily survival. A second group, which was made up of 33% of participants, was compelled to enter paid employment for the first time following sudden adversity such as the death of the previous breadwinner, desertion by their husband and pressure from the lending agency to repay the loan.

Construction work simply represented a preferred form of employment, because it was considered a higher paid form of employment in comparison to domestic work, which was virtually the only alternative open to these women in their socio-economic and class position. Construction work did not require any formal education and the entry and exit were not difficult. There were, thus, a variety of circumstances which led to women's entry into construction work, including abject poverty, unavailability of other forms of work, pressure from lending agencies to repay loans and absence of an alternative and reliable breadwinner.

Participant female construction workers were predominantly casual wage labourers. All of the participants reported that their days begin very early in the morning so as to congregate at the meeting points to find work. Participants' comments revealed that the majority of them had to finish their housework before going to work; they were generally responsible for childcare and all the domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, washing and fetching water from the neighbourhood, etc. by themselves. Some chores were shared with their daughters as they are considered primarily 'women's work'. Husbands shouldered housework only occasionally and the work done by them was relatively insignificant. The youngest participant Najma had to take her young children with her to work. Despite knowing safety of the children was of concern on construction sites, she had no other options.

Construction sites are generally known to be dangerous and filthy. In Bangladesh few precautions are taken on construction sites to protect the workers from potential risks and health hazards. Participant women worked bare footed, wearing traditional dresses, without helmets, masks or any kind of protection and so they were vulnerable to minor or major injuries. On construction sites women workers' main tasks involved carrying loads, breaking bricks and rocks, mixing construction materials, earth cutting and assisting the head construction workers. However, during tea and lunch breaks they reported sharing light moments with

both male and female co-workers. Women in the construction sector are deemed to be less productive than their male counterparts because of their gender. To rebuff such claims and to prove their worth, the women seemed to work harder. Though they were engaged in laborious tasks, most of them appeared thin and fragile. All of them said they had received injuries at least a few times and were experiencing physical problems such as skin disease, asthma, chronic headache, hair loss, tooth loss and premature aging. In the construction sector work hours were not defined, consequently their work hours varied from day to day depending on the demands of the recruiters. The women's narratives revealed that on occasion they worked until midnight. Participant women reported feeling extremely tired after finishing work. Despite this, upon returning home, all but one of the participants had to do the routine housework.

Gender divisions of labour, wage discrimination and inequity

Around the globe the numbers of women in the labour force have increased steadily but statistically most of them continue to be concentrated in the informal sectors of the labour market where working conditions are more often than not insecure (Grown and Sebstad, 1989; Momsen, 1993; Walby, 1997; Kabeer, 2008; United Nations Statistics Division, 2010). In Bangladesh, contrary to the constitutional guarantee, women receive lower wages than men in construction work (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2009). 'Sex stereotyping' (Young, 1988) is paramount and all of the participants of my study provided information about gender based wage discrimination in their work. One of the participants, Shamsunnaher¹ explained how the male recruiters discriminated against them:

If a male construction sector helper earns Tk.² 220 a day, doing the same work a female construction sector helper would get Tk. 160–180 a day. We women workers receive 30–60 taka less than a man, we feel bad but can't do anything. The *sardars* [leaders], contractors and male co-workers say women can't climb stairs carrying heavy loads like men, can't cut earth the way men do, so it is obvious that they would get less than men. However, the fact is this is an excuse to give us fewer wages. (Age 43, separated, Life history [11])

Another participant, Jorina, was very critical of the claim that because men are more productive they receive higher wages. She contended:

Male construction workers claim that they carry more loads than us; although we usually carry less loads in one go, we keep carrying without taking any rest. The whole day on construction site we run from here to there. Men often take breaks after carrying something heavy. Head construction workers who do bricklaying, plastering and so on, do not even move from their places. They do not bother picking up the instrument lying at their arm length; we need to pass it onto their hands. We have no respite in the workplace! (Jorina, age 33, married, Life history [12])

Cookie highlighted why women workers do not and cannot effectively bargain with recruiters for wages. She explained:

We women do not bargain for wages since all of us badly need these earnings. There is no way of bargaining. I don't want to miss the opportunity to earn some money by bargaining for a little more. (Cookie, age 29, Life history [4])

Drawing upon traditional Javanese norms Javanese factories pay female workers lower wages on the basis that women's income is supplementary and therefore superfluous (Wolf, 1991). Socio-biological inferences continue to underpin a widespread belief that a 'natural' differentiation between men and women exists, which is an outcome of natural capacities and personality traits of both women and men (Elson and Pearson, 1981, 1984). Since men and women are different in many regards, society also supports differentiation of their income needs by saying men need an income to support a family, while women do not (Kabeer, 2008). The continuation of the myth of the male breadwinner perpetuates the secondary status of women in the labour market (Momsen, 1993; Safa, 1995). All the female construction workers' words reiterated these findings:

If we ask, why do male workers get more wages? The contractor and male co-workers reply, a man is responsible for maintaining his family financially [...] you are a woman if you do not work for the whole week it does not matter. You are not running the family. (Jahela, age 29, married, Life history [1])

Although women were aware of the fact that they were being exploited, they did not consider protesting against the discrimination since their work was highly insecure in nature and there was an abundant labour pool. In fact, they consciously conceded the exploitation as their bargaining ability was limited.

I have seen on TV that male and female have equal rights and they should get equal payment for equal

work. However, we do not get equal payment. (Fathema, age 37, widow, Life history [2])

If I speak up [...] they would think of not hiring me in future. (Shamsunnaher, age 43, separated, Life history [11])

Jobs which are characterized as men's work tend to be classified as 'skilled' (Phillips and Taylor, 1980; Elson and Pearson, 1984; Momsen, 1993; Kabeer, 2008). The tasks at the construction sites are gender segregated with women performing 'low-skilled' heavy carrying work and the men doing 'higher skilled' bricklaying and plastering tasks (also see Byrne *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, the wages for women are considerably lower than wages for men. Basu and Thomas (2009) also found the same in their research conducted in India. Grieco and Whipp's (1986) study in the UK claimed women workers were confined to low paid jobs, forced to depend on men and fulfil the role of unpaid domestic workers. In accordance with these findings the participants of my study reported:

We mix cement with other materials, break bricks, carry large *kodai* [bowl] [...] Some people [only men] who work with *belcha* [an instrument] earn approximately 300 taka per day, [those] who run the machine [only men] also earn Tk. 250–300 per day, we carry the *kodai* and get 180–200 taka per day. Sometimes we get Tk. 150 a day for assisting the main workers. (Fathema, age 37, widow, Life history [2])

While participants of my study were aware of the fact that learning the 'skills' could facilitate their access to more income and help keep at bay some of the exhausting tasks, they were also aware that it was more problematic for them to do so as women. In Bangladesh, because of the lack of opportunities to obtain formal training, construction sector apprentices are primarily dependent on the senior masons/head construction workers to learn the masonry skills. Head construction workers generally disseminate their acquired skills to their younger co-workers based on personal relationships. According to Cookie women's desire to learn skills from male head workers may expose them to further complications such as sexual advances from the male co-workers. She elucidated:

We do not possess the desire to learn 'men's work'. If I want to learn this work, I'll have to work with a particular head construction worker for a long time. Working with someone for an extended period means to become familiar with that person. I do not want to come close to any of these men because they [men] often translate familiarity in sexual line and

start treating us as if we are their legally wedded wives. (Cookie, age 29, Life history [4])

Piya, on the other hand, had the inquisitiveness to learn a few less complicated skills such as bricklaying and plastering, therefore she sometimes gave these a try. She reported that, upon noticing her eagerness her male co-workers taunted her rather than encouraging her saying:

Oh you are now trying to learn men's work! Then why don't you become a man? (Piya, age 32, married Life history [9])

Studies conducted around the world over the past several decades continue to demonstrate that women perform the lowest paid activities and are concentrated mainly in low status jobs and occupations (Grown and Sebstad, 1989; Pearson, 1995; Chan, 2003; United Nations Statistics Division, 2010). Women are considered to be 'naturally' more suited to tedious, repetitious and monotonous work (Elson and Pearson, 1984; Weston, 1998; Pearson, 2007). Although men are by and large considered as active workers, women's ability is under constant scrutiny and the widespread notion is that women are less competent than men (see Weston, 1998; Mitra, 2005). All of the participants' narratives clearly upheld the view that they were encountering discrimination at their work on the basis of their gender:

Men get higher wages. Although we work very hard, everyone says we are women [*amra meye manush*]. It does not matter how efficient you are at your work, you will be reminded all the time that you are a woman. Therefore, you will receive less. (Piya, age 32, married Life history [9] and Jorina, age 33, married, Life history [12])

Nevertheless, some of the participants reported that although their male co-workers were in a more favourable position in many regards including wages, men sometimes envied female workers when they appeared to get preference over male labourers. It however seemed that both men and women workers take such work-related jealousy quite lightly. Jahela quoted the comment made by one of her male co-workers:

Huh men will not recruit us, they will recruit you as you are women and why not! [Indicating the scope of making sexual advances]. (Jahela, age 29, married, Life history [1])

Weston (1998) argues that women are not 'immune' from the notion that men are superior, a situation

mirrored in this study. Despite all this discrimination, the deprivation and chitchat it was observed that some sort of friendship or relationships of convenience were nurtured both by male and female workers. On some occasions female workers mingled with male co-workers as a necessary component of the working environment. Julekha's story captured this picture:

On construction sites we try to keep ourselves cheerful, we joke and do leg pulling and many other things. We mingle with men more freely in the workplace but at our homes these men do not have entrance. We spend the whole day together like more than a friend, but it is only in the public world. In my private world [home] these men have no access. In daylight I have many husbands but at night I do not have any. (Julekha, age 38, widow, Life history [3])

Najma, on the other hand, socialized with her co-workers to ensure their cooperation at work. She further illuminated that she consciously extended friendship with a few male co-workers to get their support to obtain her due wages from shrewd *sardars*, to feel a bit more secure in the workplace, and face other co-workers who were rather unfriendly.

'Family values'

In Bangladesh, under classic patriarchal tradition women's participation in paid work, despite having become unavoidable in many circumstances has received little recognition in comparison to other parts of the globe (Kandiyoti, 2005). However, recent studies suggest that waged employment can lead to positive changes in women's lives, including: improved bargaining position within the household (Kabeer, 1997); increased access to information and support networks (Amin *et al.*, 1997); and increased feelings of self-esteem (Salway *et al.*, 2005, p. 319). The reports of my participants regarding the attitude of their immediate family members, indeed, captured a mixed state of affairs. Some of them explained they experienced positive changes in their husbands' behaviour.

Now he has changed his attitude towards me and loves me as I earn money. If I cannot earn, I will not receive that treatment. (Cookie, age 29, Life history [4])

My husband says, now we can eat properly as both of us are earning. Without your income it would not have been possible. (Piya, age 32, Life history [9])

Rabeya herself, on the other hand, felt bad as she had been working in construction sites. She often tried to conceal the fact about her work from others, thinking that they might ridicule her. She did not expect any positive recognition from anyone:

My husband [...] even does not recognize us so I have no tension about his feelings, or his dignity. My son-in-law says he feels bad for me [...] I told him if I leave this work, I have to beg to feed my other children and then you will tell my daughter that you have got married to the daughter of a beggar [...]

My daughters also do not want me to work on construction sites; they say they feel ashamed of it. But I tell them if you can starve, I would not go to work. (Age 41, deserted, Life history [5])

Some women were quite aware of their husbands' or children's inability or unwillingness to accept their responsibilities. Thus, they did not bother about other family members' attitudes, and I would argue that this reflects women's growing consciousness about their self-esteem. In Aklima's words:

My sons [...] are not taking my responsibilities. They never said me that they would feed me or they would try to repay my loan. Since they are not helping me financially, it is not useful for me to listen to them. (Age 53, married, Life history [7])

Economic autonomy and agency

Women's access to paid employment has important implications for their own well-being and agency. When women earn an ample income, it confers on them greater recognition within the household and a relatively fair share of intra-household welfare-related resources (Kabeer, 2008).

Now I can buy a new *saree*, some consumer goods and many other small things for which we had a long desire [...]

When we go home, we wear nice clothes, shoes and I even take a vanity bag.

[...] he at least allows me to give my opinions. (Jahela, age 29, married, Life history [1])

Now I keep my earnings in my hand. (Julekha, age 38, widow, Life history [3])

Economic independence can act as a key to freeing women from male dominance (Tinker, 1990). Many studies report that women's self-esteem grows when they begin earning independent income. Specifically they increased in independence, self-reliance, self-esteem and the perceived respect of their families (Blumberg, 1991; Kibria, 1995; Kabeer, 1997). Cookie's statement obviously reflected her autonomy:

Had I been not working outside I would have to look at my husband's hand [being financially completely dependent on husband] now I can earn my own living and can maintain our family expenses for a few days. (Age 29, married, Life history [4])

Aklima, who was married for decades, was trying to negotiate with her abusive husband after gaining economic independence and exposure to the outside world:

When I came to Sylhet, I sought permission from my husband to take some rice and lentils with me so that I can survive for few days [...] He even did not allow me to take a single morsel of grain with me [...]

Now I have no attraction towards home or husband. (Age 53, migrated to city leaving her husband back in home, Life history [7])

Piya explained how her economic contribution to the family contributed to the change of mood of her husband:

[...] after joining the workforce my husband does not beat me frequently. When he is in good mood, he listens to me. (Age 32, Life history [9])

Another participant Halima provided an account of her independence:

I have decided to visit the shrine of 'Atrashir peer' [spiritual leader]. It is away from here but I would like to go. I talked to my sons and they said if you want to go what can we say? (Age 46, widow, Life history [8])

Minara, a married participant, illustrated how her ability to earn an income and wisdom in managing the family income awarded her an elevated position not only within the household but within the community (see Gardner, 1997). However, more recent³ empirical findings have further illustrated that earning an income through work is not sufficient to alter women's position fundamentally. Far from leading to empowerment, women's work may represent a further dimension of

exploitation by both families and employers (Salaway *et al.*, 2005, p. 318; Tinker, 1990; Greenhalgh, 1991; Desai and Jain, 1992). Perhaps this is the reason why poor women themselves do not enjoy their economic autonomy in many cases:

I always feel that I have a husband still I am doing such gruelling work [*beta thakteo khete morchi*]. If my parents were alive today, they would not have let me do this type of work. (Cookie, age 29, Life history [4])

Similar words were echoed by Piya. Instead of enjoying their autonomy, women themselves sometimes find it demeaning to work outside with men.

I am working on construction sites with men, it is a matter of great shame. (Halima, age 46, widow, Life history [8])

Wolf's (1991) study finds that although autonomy exists in some quarters, patriarchal control is also exerted over issues of female propriety and freedom. Like the Javanese factory girls in Wolf's study, female construction workers in Bangladesh still operate according to certain endorsed traditional, submissive and dependent female roles within the family. In a society where family reputation and women's status are enhanced when women are kept in seclusion from the public world, even though they become economically more dependent, women are less likely to fully enjoy their economic autonomy (Tinker, 1990, p. 51). Existing social norms often put enormous pressure on them and make them believe that they are not conforming to their culture and tradition.

Social exclusion

In this study, I found most of the participants felt bad about the reaction of others towards their work and deliberately tried to avoid contact with people who might not value their work. They even sometimes used to hide facts about their work to their friends and family and stay away from any discussion regarding their employment.

If my brothers come to know the truth about my work, they will stop my husband on his way and insult him. (Jahela, age 29, Life history [1])

If my acquaintances come to know that I work on construction sites, they will look down upon me. (Cookie, age 29, married, Life history [4])

Rabeya, however, expressed mixed feelings; on the one hand she was content with the fact that she could support her children by working on construction sites and on the other she felt awful when she thought about her acquaintances' reactions:

My son-in-law's parents do not know that I work on construction sites with male [...]

Here nobody is my relative or kin so who is going to criticize me? I know many people say bad things about our work. They [...] deem we wander on streets because of our enjoyment. (Age 41, deserted, Life history [5])

Minara shed light on her new socio-cultural milieu that enabled her to work in the public sphere with confidence:

It is not my place, I am a migrant here. I do not know anyone here, people also do not know me. Hence, I do not feel too embarrassed to work in the public sphere. (Minara, age 46, married, Life history [10])

A parallel tale was echoed by Jahela who stated that she would never have worked in a male dominated sphere in her own village.

However, some of the participants were really proud to talk about their work as they were working hard to support their family.

I tell everyone that I work on construction sites. I do not feel bad to confess that [...] I do not care if someone looked down upon me. (Shamsunnaher, age 43, separated, Life history [11])

Jorina and Julekha were reportedly not at all concerned about the reaction of other people. They said that they only cared for the recognition of their husbands which again reinforces the continued issue that even women who are earning a visible wage may also feel unable to challenge the authority of men and traditional gender ideology. Thus even working women, who are contributing equally to, or in some cases more than, their husbands, still rely heavily on the sanctions of the men of the households.

Sexual harassment and threat of firing

'Researchers estimated that as many as 70% of employed women all over the world have experienced behaviours that may legally constitute sexual harassment' (MacKinnon, 1979; Giuffre and Williams,

2005, p. 247). Women working out in open streets, pavements, construction sites and market places are subject to different sorts of pressures, including sexual harassment and rape (Mosse, 1993; Kabeer, 2008; Basu and Thomas, 2009). In traditional societies, a woman who moves out of her accepted family role in order to take a job may be seen as a 'loose' woman. Men who are not used to meeting women in a work situation may draw back on gender based social expectations and treat their female colleagues as sexually available (Momsen, 1993). Almost every participant reported that they came across some forms of sexual harassment at their workplace, mostly by the co-workers. These views emerged from the words of Jahela:

[...] male co-workers frequently try to establish illicit relation with female co-workers. (Age 29, married, Life history [1])

At our work many people particularly male co-workers want to establish physical proximity. It becomes more problematic for us when the main men [*raj mistry*] want to make sexual advances. Since their work is very important, neither *sardars* nor contractors say anything to them. If you do not allow them to come closer, they will not take you to work the next day. (Rabeya, age 41, deserted, Life history [5])

Since there is a threat of firing associated with non-compliance with the desire of male co-workers, some women find it better to compromise than to protest against the sexual harassment. Julekha, who was the principal breadwinner of her family, found that making complaints about sexual harassment in the workplace was similar to arguing with the crocodiles while living in water:

I feel bad. Nevertheless, I consciously hide my feelings. (Age 38, widow, Life history [3])

Cookie, who was not ready for such negotiation, felt she did not get work regularly and received threats of being dropped from work as she was not yielding to the demands of people attempting to make sexual advances. She also reported that she did not feel ashamed to raise her voice against exploitative co-workers:

I ask, 'Have you recruited me for work or something else. Do you think that I am a prostitute [*amake ki bazari meye peyechish*]?' (Age 29, married, Life history [4])

Workers in many jobs are hired on the basis of their attractiveness and solicitousness (Giuffre and

Williams, 2005). A vivid description on that issue was provided by Shamsunnaher:

Sarders and male co-workers always try to hire young women. They even say if we hire young workers, they will serve two purposes (work and sex) [...] we are old; my skin is not tight enough so we are not on the list of favourites. (Age 43, separated, Life history [11])

Almost every female construction worker considers sexual harassment as an integral part of their work. Thus, they also generate their own mechanisms to resist unwanted sexual advances, including establishing kinship, women helping women, dissociating from the co-workers who are difficult to deal with, making friends, etc. However, there is also a tendency among women workers to blame each other for sexual harassment in the workplace. It is interesting that in a patriarchal society women's thought pattern is so deeply influenced by these cultural messages that instead of blaming the patriarchal society and repulsive male co-workers, female construction workers often point fingers at each other for the sexual advances on the part of men:

In our work many women go with *sarders* [...] No one ask them to hurry or rebuke them. *Sarders* also know who wants what so they behave accordingly. (Halima, age 46, widow, Life history [8])

Verbal abuse

In rural Bangladesh, the numbers of women doing paid work and their share of household earnings are significantly higher in poorer households (Kabeer, 2008). This statement is equally true for the poor urban women in Bangladesh. For poorer households a diversity of activities may simply represent a survival strategy. According to Kabeer (2008), they will engage in a variety of low return, easy entry, often exploitative activities that require little capital or skill but are characterized by varying degrees of risks and hazards. The narratives of female construction workers also revealed the fact that in addition to different types of vulnerability they were always exposed to verbal assault in the workplace. Women with very few options find resistance to such maltreatment difficult as their vulnerability enforces greater tolerance.

Verbal abuse is so prevalent in the workplace that workers even tend to believe it is natural. Shamsunnaher illustrated:

At work you have to bear the temper of the contractors, *sarders* and head worker, otherwise ... (Age 43, separated, Life history [11])

They even justified the action of the supervisors from the perspective of contractors.

It is true that if they reprimand us, they get better return. (Rabeya, age 41, deserted, Life history [5])

Najma pointed out that *sarders* and contractors were usually extraordinarily inconsiderate to female workers as women rarely spoke back. She commented:

sarders and contractors always ask us to hurry, they arbitrarily use abusive language and keep us under pressure all the time, but they do not do the same to our male counterparts. Even when they [recruiters] ask them to hurry, they barely use offensive language. [Age 21, deserted, Life history [6])

Aklima, the oldest participant described the duality of the selection process and of her treatment by co-workers, *sarders* and contractors. On the one hand, she did not find work because she was old, yet on the other hand, when she found work, she did not face harsh words like other workers.

Most of the people respect me as an aged woman. Some *sarders* and co-workers call me *chachee* [aunt]. (Age 53, married, Life history [7])

Shamsunnaher, who was in her mid-40s, however, believed she was more vulnerable because of her age.

If we take rest while working, people rebuke us. Since we are not young, therefore, not able to entertain them. (Age 43, separated, Life history [11])

As we saw, within construction work women are typically lower paid, defined as less skilled, low in the hierarchy of authority and have relatively poor conditions of work. In this way the sexual division of labour is both produced and reproduced as the wage labour market develops, thereby perpetuating this particular form of women's subordination (Mackintosh, 1984).

Conclusion

In a patriarchal society such as Bangladesh it can be difficult for a woman to join the workforce as it may be perceived as a serious slight on the family's honour. I found that even in acute poverty men did not readily allow women of their households to work outside for payment. Growing impoverishment, however, compels them to compromise and men themselves, in some cases, wanted their women to work outside the home earning a living for the family. Almost 58%

participants of my study had to join the workforce as they did not have a male to support them socially and financially.

I found the participants of my study generally received greater respect and recognition from their family members, particularly husbands when they were making a tangible financial contribution. As long as they have the support of their husbands they said that they hardly cared about others' comments. Participants who were the sole breadwinners of their households and living without a male partner were a bit reluctant to think about the attitude of others. For the married participants, it was the husband's attitude which ultimately mattered and eventually reinforces the potency of patriarchy. However, women's paid employment tended to bring a shift in their perceptions of themselves. Almost every woman expressed a sense of increased self-worth, economic independence and enjoyed greater autonomy.

The female construction workers' experiences nevertheless resulted in mixed feelings. Participants reported that on the one hand they were proud to think about their ability to maintain their families financially; on the other they were embarrassed thinking about their acquaintances' reactions and society's censure against their participation in paid work. Sexual harassment was another significant facet of workplace life. Female construction workers I spoke to regularly encountered sexual harassment in their workplace by male co-workers. Yet they seldom raised voices against sexual harassment as it was often associated with the threat of being fired from work. Like sexual harassment, verbal abuse was an integral part of the work experience of female construction workers. However, it is interesting that many participants of this study themselves considered verbal abuse a natural phenomenon and productive on the part of the *sardars* or the contractors in terms of forcing the women to work even harder. Wage discrimination and 'sex stereotyping' (Young, 1988) was nearly universal in construction work. I found there were clear distinctions between men's and women's work in the construction sector. Because of gendered divisions of labour all of the participants were reported to be engaged in particular types of work which were considered 'less skilled'. In addition, participant female construction workers, irrespective of their economic responsibilities toward their family, were treated by the contractors, *sardars* and male co-workers only as a 'supplementary' (Safa, 1984, p. 1168) earner. I found that all these arguments were used to discriminate against the female construction workers and keep them in a position of subordination. Although participant female construction workers knew that they were facing discrimination, they deliberately refrained from

raising 'voice' because of their weak 'fallback' position as workers. Poor women's inability to choose the 'exit' option and their male counterparts' comprehension of their helplessness effectively underpins women's exploitation by men in the workplace. In this study I found women's age an important factor in shaping their experience in the workplace. Relatively younger female construction workers consistently complained about sexual harassment in the workplace while elderly female construction workers alleged that the recruiters try not to recruit them as they are not 'sexually desirable' because of their age.

For those advocating policy interventions aimed at rectifying women's situation in the construction sector, I recommend a few small combined initiatives by the government and non-governmental organizations. Ensuring equal wages for equal work regardless of gender, unionizing female workers, creating support networks, and providing women with adequate training for skilled work in the construction sector are but a few options that can ameliorate women's material position. Presumably women's improved situation in the labour market will act as an enabling factor for them to renegotiate gender relations in the private sphere.

Finally I would say it would be misleading to make any firm statement about the experiences of female construction workers. Female construction workers' visibility on construction sites has transformed their lives in many ways. Their visibility on construction sites has increased the acceptability of women's entrance into heavily male dominated, laborious, competitive paid work which was totally contrary to the societal norms. Women enjoyed many positive outcomes of their paid work in different facets of their life; conversely, they also encountered significant exploitation in the male dominated workplace and I would argue that the majority of participants face patriarchal control and exploitation both in home and workplace. In accordance with Elson and Pearson's (1981, 1984; Pearson, 1998, 2007) observation I also argue that while paid work may evidently lessen women's one form of gender subordination within the home, it exposes them to another form of gender subordination in the public domain, that of women workers to male contractors, supervisors and co-workers. Ultimately, then, while paid work is an emancipatory factor for female construction workers, in the current socio-cultural context it is simultaneously inherently exploitative and inequitable.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of the participants.

2. One pound is equivalent to 130 taka approximately.
3. This article is primarily based on my MA thesis conducted on female construction workers in 2010. However, it also draws heavily on fieldwork (2011–12) carried out for my PhD thesis (expected completion date Sep. 2013) where I look at both the male and female construction workers in Sylhet, Bangladesh.

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