


Women construction workers in Nepal: Collectivities under precarious conditions

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Funding information

Global Challenges Research Fund; London International Development Centre

Abstract

In this article, we explore the experiences of women construction workers in Nepal and the strategies that these workers have adopted to challenge the exploitation and inequalities they confront. We firstly argue that the experiences of women construction workers in Nepal are shaped by compulsive engagement in labor markets under conditions of informality, precarity, and gendered responsibility for social reproduction. These experiences reflect multiple intersections of gender, class, caste, and ethnicity in the arenas of the household, the workplace, trade unions, and the state. However, policy interventions related to women's participation in labor markets and inspired by the Gender Equality as Smart Economics approach, such as Nepal's post-earthquake mason training scheme targeting women construction workers, render invisible these structures of inequality, exploitation, and violence. Second, we argue that women construction workers negotiate—and in some cases challenge and change—working conditions, primarily through a variety of informal and formal collective strategies. Women construction workers' own narratives and practices, we find, bear little resemblance to the narratives promoted by the International Financial Institutions and the state, in which women workers appear as resilient, altruistic, and industrious entrepreneurial subjects seeking

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individual self-improvement within the neoliberal framework. They rather invoke informal and organized collectivities, negotiate, and often resist, gendered norms of behavior and at times radically re-envision the scope of trade union struggles.

KEYWORDS

construction, gender, labor, Nepal, trade unions

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this article, based on discussions with 102 women construction workers in eight districts of Nepal, we explore women's embodied experiences of work in construction and the strategies that women workers have adopted to challenge the exploitation and inequalities they confront. We explain how the experiences of women construction workers in Nepal are shaped by compulsive engagement in labor markets under conditions of informality, precarity, and gendered responsibility for social reproduction. Key themes that emerged from both interviews and focus groups included wage inequality, the absence of worksite facilities, sexual harassment, and time poverty. These experiences, we argue, reflect multiple intersections of gender, class, caste, and ethnicity in the arenas of the household, the workplace, trade unions, and the state. However, policy interventions related to women's participation in labor markets, such as Nepal's post-earthquake mason training scheme targeting women construction workers, render these structures of inequality and exploitation invisible.

These policy measures, promoted by states, the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and NGOs, continue to be shaped predominantly by the Gender Equality as Smart Economics approach (World Bank, 2012). This approach argues that gender inequality and poverty can be addressed simultaneously by the incorporation of women—viewed as an “untapped resource”—into labor markets (Chant, 2016; Chant & Sweetman, 2012) and that increasing women's access to skills—understood as “human capital”—will lead to mobility within these markets (Calkin, 2019). It fails to challenge the structures of intersectionally gendered inequality, exploitation, and violence that inevitably underpin competitive market systems, which prioritize economic growth.

Embedded in this approach are gendered and racialized constructions of women in low-income households in the Global South as entrepreneurial, hyperindustrious, and extraordinarily resilient (Wilson, 2015), and neoliberal understandings of women's empowerment as individual self-improvement combined with gendered altruism in relation to the family (Chakravarti, 2008; Rankin, 2001). Engaging with experiences of collective organizing and resistance by women workers in these contexts can, we suggest, potentially challenge these dominant approaches.

We discuss how women construction workers negotiate—and in some cases challenge and change—working conditions, primarily through a variety of collective strategies. These include both informal solidarities and trade union organizing. Women construction workers' own narratives and practices, we find, bear little resemblance to the narratives promoted by the IFIs and the state, in which women workers appear as resilient, altruistic, and industrious entrepreneurial subjects. They rather invoke informal and organized collectivities, negotiate, and often resist, gendered norms of behavior and at times radically re-envision the scope of trade union struggles.

2 | INFORMALITY, PRECARIETY, AND ORGANIZING AMONG WOMEN WORKERS

Several decades of growing labor precarity, in which the feminization and informalization of work, alongside extensive privatization, outsourcing, and the expansion of the gig economy are central features (Chen & Carré, 2020),

have forced workers globally to seek new strategies and new forms of organizing within and outside of trade unions. In South Asia, with sustained histories of labor organizing and female labor forces that are overwhelmingly informal, women workers have long engaged in multiple forms of collective organizing, even as they have continued to face exclusion and marginalization from many formal institutions (Baruah, 2004; Ghosh, 2021; Harriss-White, 2020). These strategies frequently involve challenging intersectionally gendered forms of exploitation.

Much of the literature on workers' organizing in contexts of persistent informality as well as neoliberal restructuring of labor markets has been structured around a series of contrasts between what are seen as "traditional" trade union approaches and "new" forms of organizing associated with NGOs and various types of member-based organizations (Collins, 2006; Eaton et al., 2017; Kabeer et al., 2013).

However, with the decline of secure, formal unionized workforces, there is a recognition that mainstream unions are increasingly compelled to try to adopt new strategies to engage with the struggles of informal, unorganized, and gig workers (Eaton et al., 2017). Simultaneously, there is a growing acknowledgment that NGOs engaged with informal workers cannot take the place of unions (Domínguez Reyes & Quintero Ramírez, 2019); the focus of NGOs on alternative income generating activities at the expense of workers' rights (RoyChowdhury, 2005), with depoliticizing agendas tied to funding from donor governments in the Global North, tends to delegitimize labor insurgency (Ismail, 2018; Siddiqi, 2020).

As noted in a variety of contexts, the demands of informal women workers have extended the meaning and scope of workers' struggles (Collins, 2006; Kabeer et al., 2013; Mills, 2005). In particular, the gendered compulsions of social reproduction have shaped these demands, which have extended beyond improved workplace conditions to claims over multiple forms of social provision. Raising these demands involves engaging in what Fraser (2016) calls "boundary struggles" over what can be included in workers' rights and is potentially transformative.

3 | WOMEN CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN NEPAL

In the era of neoliberal globalization and austerity, construction work around the world has witnessed the "extension of subcontracting chains, avoidance of unions where they exist, and widespread flouting of labor and social insurance regulations" (Tilly, 2020, p. 247). Simultaneously, growing inequality and income polarization have generated construction booms (Tilly, 2020). In Nepal, prior to the 2015 earthquakes, rapid and uneven urbanization, particularly after the end of the civil war, was already leading to increased construction activity with suggestions that remittance receivers and returning international migrants played a significant role in this process (Adhikari & Deshingkar, 2015; Muzzini & Aparicio, 2013). In turn, construction work has been a driver of rural-urban migration (Adhikari & Deshingkar, 2015; Danish Trade Union Development Agency, 2022). Construction work in Nepal is generally precarious: "wages are low, workers rarely have written contracts or access to social security, and there is a high risk of sickness, injury and death" (Adhikari & Deshingkar, 2015, p. 8). The Nepal Labour Force Survey (NLFS) notes that forced labor and excessive working hours are pervasive in the sector (Kanel, 2021, p. 272).

Published in 2019 in collaboration with the ILO and drawing on data up until 2017/2018, the NLFS calculates that approximately 111,000 women work in construction, 93% of whom are engaged in informal work (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019). According to these figures, women constitute approximately 11.3% of the workforce in construction, a share which continues to rise. Women construction workers constituted 4.2% of all employed women in the 2019 NLFS, up from only 0.7% in the 2008 NLFS. As elsewhere, however, the industry remains heavily dominated by men, both in terms of workers and contractors.

4 | OUR STUDY

Our study sought to understand women's experiences of work in construction, and the strategies that women workers are adopting to challenge the exploitation and inequalities they confront. The research was carried out between October 2017 and August 2019 in urban and semiurban centers in the districts of Kathmandu, Lalitpur,

Kavre, Nuwakot, and Sindhupalchowk and involved discussions with 102 women construction workers. Participants were identified through local organizations (construction workers' trade unions and NGOs involved in earthquake reconstruction and training schemes for women in construction), through direct approaches by the researchers, and through snowballing; all worked on private construction projects, predominantly housebuilding.¹ The research design involved a combination of nine focus group discussions, each involving 6–12 women and 20 in-depth semistructured interviews with individual women construction workers. Group discussions facilitated exchanges between participants, allowing for deeper reflection on collective strategies, a key focus. In practice, we found that interviews set up as one-to-one conversations also often expanded to include other women and flowed more freely when more than one woman took part. Interviews were conducted at a variety of locations including labor stops—where workers gathered early in the morning in the hope of being recruited by contractors—in Kathmandu and Lalitpur, and in other places where participants felt comfortable to talk, for example, at tea stalls where they met before work. We also interviewed three men who worked as small-scale contractors in construction, as well as trade union activists and leaders, senior officials in the Ministry of Labour and the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA), and staff in international organizations and NGOs based in Nepal.²

Seeking to generate spaces and platforms for women construction workers themselves was an integral part of the research design. Following the interviews and focus group discussions and discussions with several women union activists from different trade unions, we organized three events. The first was a strategy meeting specifically focused on questions of organizing in May 2019, which was conceived of as a space in which women construction workers could identify shared issues of concern and discuss ideas for addressing them. All the participants who had expressed an interest in collective organizing, or had highlighted issues which they saw as requiring change, were invited to take part. This included both unionized and non-unionized women. Fifteen women from seven districts (Kailali, Myagdi, Kavre, Sindhupalchowk, Siraha, Kathmandu, and Lalitpur) participated. Following this meeting, we organized a roundtable discussion at which women construction workers raised their concerns directly with government officials as well as representatives of international organizations, NGOs, and trade unions. This was particularly important in the context of recent government initiatives around minimum wages, equal pay, social security, and guaranteed work. Finally, we organized a press conference for both Nepali and English media to share the findings of the research with a wider audience and highlight the conditions and demands of women workers in the construction sector.³

The majority of women construction workers who participated in the study described themselves as “helpers,” a term used to refer to workers who carried out tasks such as mixing the “masala” or mortar, carrying construction materials such as bricks, sand, mortar, and rods, and breaking stones. A smaller number had moved from being helpers to being marble chip workers, cutting, polishing, and cleaning marble floors. This involves working in teams of 5–12 women. In the districts of Kavre and Nuwakot, many of the women construction workers we interviewed had taken part in programs providing mason training to women.

Among the women participants in the urbanized districts of Kathmandu and Lalitpur, over 80% had previously migrated to the Kathmandu Valley with their families. This ratio varies in other districts. It is notable, however, that a large proportion of women construction workers we spoke to in urban areas are currently single. This includes women who have not yet married or are widowed, those who are divorced or separated from their husbands (e.g. after husbands married a second wife), and some who have been abandoned by their husbands or families. Many of these women are the main or sole breadwinners in their households. This also applies to a number of women in the study who live with male partners who are unable to earn for a variety of reasons and some who are married to outmigrants who do not send regular remittances.⁴ The vast majority of participants belong to landless households or in rural areas, households with marginal landholdings, without any significant assets. Across the research areas, the majority of women construction workers aged 35 and over did not receive primary education, though this appears to be changing with a higher proportion of younger women workers having attended primary school, in line with national trends (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 1999, 2006).

According to the 2011 population census (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012), Nepal is home to 125 different castes and ethnic groups. A dominant minority (31% of the population) comprises “upper caste” groups (predominantly

Bahun and Chhetri) originating in the hill regions of Nepal. The three other macroethnic groups are Dalits (oppressed and exploited castes who were subjected to untouchability), also originating in the hill regions, Janajatis (distinct indigenous communities who have historically been outside the Hindu caste system), and Madhesis (inhabitants of the southern plains or Terai region of Nepal, who are also divided by caste and include Dalits). This diversity is reflected in considerable variation in gender norms and relations in Nepal (Kharel et al., 2016). All of these main groups were represented among the women construction workers we interviewed, with a predominance of Janajati women, who made up 65% of participants.

It was also striking that marble chip worker teams were diverse in terms of caste, regional background, and age. This reflects the fact that women from multiple castes and communities (including a section of poor women from so-called “upper castes”) have increasingly entered construction work, which was previously primarily undertaken by Janajati and Dalit women (Binda Pandey MP, Trade Union Policy Institute, interview, August 2, 2018). At the same time, as we will see, the intersections of caste with class and gender continue to fundamentally shape women construction workers' experiences.

5 | WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN THE CONSTRUCTION SECTOR

In this section, we discuss some key themes which emerged from our discussions with women construction workers about their experiences of working in construction. In particular, participants repeatedly highlighted institutionalized wage inequality, the absence of worksite facilities, and sexual harassment. We then consider the question of time poverty and how women construction workers balance unpaid domestic labor and waged work. Finally, we explore women's experiences of a specific initiative: the post-earthquake mason training scheme.

5.1 | Unequal wages

Women are most often designated as “helpers” whose work is assumed to be unskilled. Whereas men's designation and pay rate change over time as they acquire experience (Kanel, 2021, p. 279), women continue to be classified as helpers even when carrying out tasks considered skilled. As Parvati,⁵ a 32-year-old construction worker in Kavre with 17 years' experience told us: “By now I know how to do all the masons' work, like building structures, and making walls, but we only get paid as helpers and recognized as helpers—women are not considered skilled labourers”.

Dominant perceptions of women's capacities are also reflected in wages where male “helpers” are routinely paid 30%–50% more than women. The common justification given by contractors is that men are more efficient and can do heavier work, although in practice women and men are often doing the same work. Another trope, which was repeatedly cited by *naikes* (petty contractors) we spoke to, was that women neglect their work due to a greater propensity for talking to each other: “women work but the pace is slow and when two women gather they start to talk a lot” or “at construction sites, you will see women gathering in one place and just chatting.” As we explore below, everyday communication between women construction workers is an essential element of mutual solidarity. Attempting to suppress such communication through various gendered forms of workplace discipline is a long-established strategy of control for capital (Krishnan, 2018).

These patriarchal tropes reflect and reproduce structural discrimination against women construction workers. According to the latest NLFS, women earn on average 16% less than men per month in construction (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019). However, the wages cited by respondents in our study indicated that this is a considerable underestimate of the average gender wage gap. While equal pay is mandated in the 2015 Constitution (Nepal Gazette, 2015), it is very rarely implemented. The daily rate has increased in recent years for both men and women, with a boom in construction, but workers note that it has not kept pace with inflation.

In Kathmandu, one section of women construction workers has become marble chip workers, having previously worked for many years as laborers or “helpers”. Women who have acquired machines hire other women to make up

the teams of 5–12 women required for this work. These petty contractors and their teams receive only around 17% of what the main contractor, invariably a man, is paid and health risks, including uterus prolapse caused by heavily lifting, and respiratory problems, are particularly acute for this group, but women marble chip workers explained that they valued having more control over their time.

5.2 | Facilities at worksites

There are no childcare facilities at worksites. Many women recalled in the past being compelled to take young children and babies to worksites, or leaving them at home alone, despite the risks involved. Women workers do not bring young children to worksites as frequently now, partly because the slight increase in wages allows most to make alternative arrangements. However, stable childcare arrangements, particularly for preschool children, remain elusive for many workers, and like other aspects of social reproduction, childcare is a responsibility borne almost exclusively by women.

In many cases, employers fail to provide even basic facilities such as clean drinking water, access to toilets, or protective equipment—although, as we will see, this is now being challenged. The denial of these facilities is shaped by the ideology of caste and Brahmanical notions of pollution (Pariyar, 2018) and understood by workers as a matter of dignity as well as health and safety. Janajati marble chip worker Champa recalled that: “once when I had gone into [the employer’s] toilet, they told me to clean it by hand. I was stunned and just stood outside for 3 h. Dalit women construction workers testified that owners of private homes have refused to allow them to use the toilet or drink water from the tap, even threatening them with violence if they do so.

5.3 | Sexual harassment

Women also recounted numerous experiences of sexual harassment on worksites both from contractors and fellow workers. They linked this to the fact that women construction workers are viewed as “immoral” within dominant ideologies, as they work alongside men in public spaces and are therefore seen as available for sexual harassment and exploitation. For example, one participant explained that, “Men [on construction sites] tease women and make unwanted advances. Society looks down upon women construction workers, saying they flirt with masons.” Sarita, 26, concurred: “People see women construction workers as ‘characterless’ women ...In this sector, many women are single, divorced, separated, or widowed so it’s easy to pass such comments. Co-workers and even the contractor and owner sometimes mistreat women.” This is arguably intensified by the diversity in attitudes to women working outside the home in Nepal, which varies by community as well as caste. As Shanta Basnet, Vice-President and head of the women’s section of the Central Union of Painters, Plumbers, Electro and Construction Workers-Nepal (CUPPEC), affiliated to the General Federation of Nepali Trade Unions, explained:

When I started working, [c. 1988] there were very few women, the men were [north] Indian, Bengali, or from the Terai, from more conservative backgrounds where women are confined to the house, and we were going out to work so they considered us sexually available.

This again intersects with dominant constructions, within what Shanta describes as “more conservative” communities, of Dalit and Janajati women. However, these patriarchal and Brahmanical attitudes are also entrenched among dominant hill communities in Nepal (Pariyar, 2018) even while, as Tamang (2009) notes, they are often described as exclusively characterizing Terai/Madhesi or plains communities. As Limbu and Jha (2019) highlight, there are important questions, which are rarely addressed in mainstream discourse in Nepal relating to “how caste/ethnicity mediates how different female bodies are gazed at, commodified, shamed and policed in Nepal.”

Participants explained that they were often reluctant to complain in cases of sexual harassment because of potential boycotting by employers and contractors who may themselves be involved. Women also spoke of remaining silent to avoid victim-blaming by their own family members, or because husbands and in-laws would insist on their giving up the work altogether, which was not economically viable. This demonstrates once again how patriarchal relations become a “resource for capital” (Acker, 2004) mobilized to discipline women workers. Despite this, however, women continue to resist sexual harassment in many instances as we discuss below.

5.4 | Time poverty

The Central Bureau of Statistics (2019) claims that in the construction industry, both men and women work an average of 50 h per week. This is already excessive, but the figure excludes from consideration the gendered work of social reproduction. The concept of “time poverty” refers to the acute shortage or absence of time for rest or leisure women experience due to the demands of reproductive work and paid labor (Hirway, 2017). Many participants described their struggles with time poverty: generally, they undertake paid work for 7–8 h a day, but for women in Kathmandu, this excludes up to 4 h spent at the labor stops where women are recruited each day and traveling to and from work. As Sarita told us, “From early morning to sunset you are out for work. We get 30–45 min break to have lunch and tea. There is no paid leave or overtime pay.” Participants explained that they woke between 4 and 5 a.m., cooked, washed clothes, did other household work, and then left for the labor stop, reaching between 6 a.m. and 8 a.m. The time at which they would return home depended on the location of the site where they got work that day and could be as late as 9 p.m.

Meanwhile, women in rural districts estimated that household and subsistence agricultural work require an average of between 4 and 5 h in the morning and 3–4 h in the evening. The women at a focus group discussion in Kavre—where many participants were from households with small landholdings and cultivated seasonal vegetables as well as in some cases keeping cattle, goats, and chickens—explained that their days started at 5–6 a.m., when women have to fetch drinking water. They then cut grass for cattle and did 2–3 h of farm work, followed by cooking a meal and feeding the children and elderly in the household. They then went to work on the construction site between 10 and 5 p.m. Once home, they would clean, milk cattle, pick vegetables, and tend to the animals, followed by cooking dinner. In both rural and urban contexts then, women construction workers experienced an extended working day of 16–17 h.

This is consistent with the findings of a 2015–2017 study of mainly Dalit women in rural Nepal (Chopra & Zambelli, 2017; Ghosh et al., 2017), which highlighted that women attempting to “balance” unpaid care work and paid work were forced to adapt strategies, such as “time-stretching” (waking up earlier and going to sleep later) and multitasking, and this led to “depleting effects on women’s (and children’s) mental and physical wellbeing [and] lack of time for rest and leisure” (Ghosh et al., 2017, p. 45). As Pramila, a 36-year-old Janajati woman who has worked in construction for over a decade, recounted: “After a long day of work, when I sit down for dinner I cannot stand up again on my own. My whole body starts to hurt.”

5.5 | Mason training schemes

Despite such evidence, donor-led interventions around construction workers in Nepal operate on the assumption that women’s labor can simply be extended and intensified while they continue to do the vast majority of reproductive work. The dominant narrative surrounding construction work in Nepal, which is put forward by donor-led initiatives as well as government departments and the mainstream media, is that such intensification is to be uncritically celebrated (Nepali, 2021; Pattison, 2018; Tamang, 2017). Extremely long hours worked are hailed as indicative of industriousness and entrepreneurialism rather than exploitation and oppression. The unequal division of reproductive labor is not questioned, nor is it recognized that reproductive labor too has intensified in the context of the neoliberal decimation of social provision.

Ironically, while a *Guardian* report on women masons in Nepal recognized that “female builders are still expected to keep up with their traditional jobs: housework, farming, and childcare,” it offered only the “entrepreneurial” arrangement made by one woman as the solution: “If I don’t have time to do the housework, I pay another woman a small amount to do it for me” (Pattison, 2018).

This “Smart Economics” approach emphasizes making the individual more productive and apparently more able to negotiate unregulated labor markets—improving “human capital”—rather than challenging the structures of inequality which shape these labor markets. The practical implications of this are illustrated by the experiences of women who undertook training as masons after the 2015 earthquakes.

Nepal’s post-earthquake mason training schemes were funded by the World Bank, USAID, Swiss NGO Helvetas, the UK’s Disasters Emergency Committee and others and were coordinated by Nepal’s NRA. The schemes aimed to ensure that a minimum of 20% of those receiving mason training were women; recent estimates are that women actually made up 12.6% (Nepali, 2021). As Archana Tamang, a USAID funded Gender Equality and Social Inclusion advisor at the NRA explained, the schemes aimed to identify those who were most vulnerable according to intersectional criteria relating to age, gender, disability, and caste and sought to generate sustainable livelihoods: they were very different, she told us, from earlier schemes, which provided “one goat and two chickens and one sewing machine!” Despite this, she estimated that only 7%–8% of women who received training have continued as masons (interview, August 3, 2018).

A large majority of the women construction workers we spoke to who had undertaken mason training testified that even after they had completed the training and received a government certificate, contractors were reluctant to hire them as masons and assumed that as women they would not be capable of doing the job. They therefore remained relegated to the roles of so-called helpers.⁶ For example, women construction workers in Nuwakot who undertook a 50-day on-the-job training course noted that aside from the time constraints of household work, the major challenge is recognition of their skills. Swapna, a 37-year-old woman from Kavre, explained: “No one believes that we can work as masons in our village. They said that’s not a woman’s job and they offered me the job of a helper.” Even when they are recruited as masons however, women are not paid at the same rates as men. The patriarchal refusal to recognize women workers as skilled workers allows them to be reproduced as a marginalized and lower paid section of the workforce even as their skills and experience are exploited.

Further, despite references to “intersectional” criteria at a policy level, in practice, caste hierarchies are often reinscribed through the operation of schemes such as mason training. Shilpa, a mobile team member for an earthquake reconstruction NGO recounted an incident where a Dalit household’s home was being reconstructed while those receiving on-the-job training were “upper” caste women. Money was usually provided to the house owner to provide tea and snacks for the trainees. In this case, the trainees refused to eat or drink anything prepared by the house owner because she was a Dalit; they insisted on using the money provided to prepare their own refreshments. When Shilpa raised this issue of blatant caste discrimination, her organization responded that intervening in such “social issues” might cause offense and distract from the goal of housebuilding.

6 | COLLECTIVE ORGANIZING AMONG WOMEN CONSTRUCTION WORKERS: STRATEGIES, EXPERIENCES, AND CONTRADICTIONS

In stark contrast to the woman worker imagined within the dominant Smart Economics approach, a utility-maximizing gendered subject who is highly altruistic but only in relation to her family (Chakravarti, 2008; Rankin, 2001), for women construction workers, notions of the collective and various kinds of bonds with co-workers are essential to survival and enable them to negotiate and in some cases to actively resist highly exploitative and oppressive working conditions.

6.1 | Informal collectivities

Many women construction workers, including some who are not union members, are engaged in informal strategies of mutual support and solidarity, sharing of information and skills, and collective negotiation.⁷

This is particularly striking in the case of marble chip workers, who of necessity work in teams. These teams often have a long history: Usha explained that “sometimes there are misunderstandings and arguments, but...we are good to each other. There are people whom I have known for 10–15 years.” Another group of marble chip workers in Kathmandu who meet at a tea-shop before work every day explained the importance of these meetings where information and experiences are shared:

Champa: we wake up early, make all the arrangements at home, and rush here for a chat before going to work... [laughs]

Sajana: Even if someone has to go to the other side of the city for work, they first come here for a chat.

Rita: By coming here we can fill each other in about things which have happened at different sites and share each other's experiences.

Women who worked alone as daily wage laborers also mentioned the labor stop, where workers gathered early in the morning, as a place where as well as waiting for work, they could meet and talk.

This contrasts with Hirslund's suggestion that for men working as construction laborers, “vertical” relationships with contractors are a more significant element in livelihood strategies than “horizontal” connections with other workers (Hirslund, 2021). Women we interviewed also argued that such solidarities were gendered: Sweta, 26, one of the few women we met who had undertaken mason training and gone on to work as a mason, explained that she sought to pass on her knowledge to other women, whereas “men don't share skills.” Sharing of information and skills among women workers was also linked in women's own narratives with an assertion of the necessity for economic independence from men, in the context of widespread experiences of abandonment and remarriage by husbands, as well as alcoholism and chronic occupational ill-health among men.

Over the years I have encouraged many other women to start doing construction work. I tell them to work even if they have husbands, because one cannot trust men. There are married women who are in trouble because their husbands are alcoholics...I tell them about the importance of earning and becoming self-reliant... I am a woman and I know the problems of women.

(Ganga, 40, Ratna Park Labor Stop)

In fact, the participants in our study had generally entered the sector on the advice of neighbors and family members who were already working in construction, and begun work alongside them. Several participants expressed a preference for construction work over their earlier paid work, in particular domestic work and various kinds of piece-working at home, in which they were more isolated. Other reasons cited were relatively higher earnings, the fact that home-working continues “day and night,” and not wanting to be a “servant.”

However, while cooperation and solidarity were understood to facilitate the task of negotiating with contractors more effectively, particularly through the sharing of information, for precariously employed women workers who are not union members, its potential was also limited, particularly for those working alone as daily wage laborers. Parvati's comment that “we do not make serious demands for equal pay as we are afraid of losing our jobs if we are seen to be too demanding and rebellious” reflects the costs of assertion, as well as how gendered norms of behavior are continuously mobilized to attempt to control women workers.

6.2 | Trade union collectivities

Unionized women workers we spoke to testified that union membership and activity made it possible for them to be vocal in demanding better working conditions, including equal pay. At the same time, they argued that more needs to be done to recognize the specific needs and demands of women workers and to challenge gendered inequalities and patriarchal attitudes within union structures themselves.

Members of CUPPEC, for example, made it clear that despite very real risks of employer boycott incurred by joining a union, overcoming isolation and becoming part of a collective was seen as a fundamental change: “Earlier, we were on our own, we workers did not know each other. We started knowing each other through the union. Once we raise our voice collectively, people are forced to listen.”

This collective power is exercised in an embodied form when women workers use the force of numbers to confront contractors and employers to resolve individual cases. Unionized marble chip workers in Kathmandu recounted a case where a worker was refused entry to the house she had been working in by the owner.

The worker's machine was locked inside the house for almost a year. When she insisted that she needed to collect her machine, the owner unleashed a dog on her and started beating her. After this incident was reported to the union, all the members from unions with different party affiliations jointly went there and talked to the owner and made him pay her, and freed her machine.

Several women worker-activists recounted incidents in the past where they had courageously and militantly confronted employers, drawing strength from the collective:

When workers weren't paid, we fought, we didn't back down. After one worker didn't get paid and demanded her wages from the contractor, I saw the contractor being beaten by the owner, who was refusing to pay him. I challenged the owner, and he put a pistol to my chest. I was not scared. Why should I be scared? I had the union behind me. I said ‘if one laborer gets killed, you will see how many will lay siege to your place’

(Indira, Myagdi district)

The collective power of union membership has also made it possible for women to effectively negotiate wage rates—although this largely remains on a case-by-case basis. Recently, the construction unions have advocated for equal pay and have achieved some success, notably in Makwanpur district where women workers mobilized and refused to work for less than the rate men were receiving (Strategy Meeting, May 28, 2019; The Kathmandu Post, 2019). Workers are also increasingly demanding written contracts when taking on work.⁸

6.3 | Dignity and respect

Questions of dignity and respect recurred in our discussions, highlighting the participants' expansive understanding of trade union rights, which encompass addressing the patriarchal dehumanization that they experience on a daily basis. For example, one group of women who were union activists explained that they had insisted that contractors address women workers respectfully and stop using derogatory terms or physical characteristics to address them. “I told the contractor, we work because we have to. So why do you talk disrespectfully to us and tell us off? I am not going to tolerate it” (Sunita, Siraha district). The experiences that generate these demands can also only be fully understood through an intersectional lens that takes into account caste, ethnicity, and class in relation to gender and that draws on Dalit and Janajati feminist approaches, questioning mainstream representations of gender shaped by the experiences of women in dominant groups (Sob, 2006; Tamang, 2009).

Dalit women are largely confined to low-wage employment like house construction and at the same time are excluded from “upper” caste homes by practices of untouchability which are officially outlawed but continue. This contradiction often exposes them to violence, including sexual violence, from house owners. As Sunita, a Madhesi Dalit woman worker and activist, who explained that she had earlier been involved with the Dalit movement in the

Terai, recounted, "I used to tell the owner, 'I made the house so how can you stop me from entering, without me your house would not be built. If you practice untouchability, then make your own house! You think your blood and my blood are of different colors, mine is black and yours is red?'"

In workers' narratives, changes in working conditions and facilities were linked to these questions of dehumanization, dignity, and respect.

The treatment by owners and contractors in the early days was really bad. They saw us as dirty, poor, low class people and talked to us like we were not human... We fought for toilets and water with the owner and contractor and only then things changed.

(Shanta Basnet, Interview August 2, 2018)

In making these demands, workers explicitly mobilized discourses of equality that challenge class and caste hierarchies. Bimala, a marble chip worker who was a union member, explained: "They used to ask us to relieve ourselves in the open. We started telling them that we will go out in the open only if they too did that. Nowadays, they provide at least a temporary plastic shed."

In collective discussions about unionization, women repeatedly highlighted their resistance to sexual harassment and violence. Some women recounted physically defending themselves or their co-workers. More generally, the union is invoked by women members to deter harassment: "We tell them that if they carry on with such behavior [sexual harassment], we will file a case against them with the union. Now such incidents happen much less often" (Bimala, Kathmandu).

Lakshmi, a Janajati construction worker and union activist in Kavre explained: "Attending meetings, conventions and other programmes has made us much more confident. We know that the organisation is there for us, we do have certain rights, and we should raise our voice if any one discriminates against us or misbehaves with us."

6.4 | Impacts of gender relations in households

At the same time, however, participants pointed out that their experiences as workers and activists were shaped by gender relations also operating within their households. Lakshmi described how gendered time poverty and patriarchal controls over women's mobility combined to create acute pressures on women workers engaged in activism:

Being involved in the union, we need to attend various programmes. Then our work is affected. If we do not work, we are not paid: "time is money." Sometime we get home late from union activities, then we have to provide explanations, there are arguments, fights, violence—this is what our activism costs us. Managing our time—work, children, home, organizing—is very difficult.

Similarly, Mandira, a construction worker and union activist from Kailali noted:

Let's take this example of attending this meeting. For me to come here, I had to get permission from my husband. We have to wake up early, prepare food, get the kids ready, and then come to work. If we come back late from work, family members ask why we are late... Sometimes when it's late and we are in a hurry and we get a lift on a bike with someone, they ask us who we came with... so many questions are asked.

Yet the possibility of change in these household relationships was also articulated in the context of collective organizing, with, for example, Mandira also explaining that her own family members' attitudes to her activism had gradually shifted and become more supportive in response to her sustained engagement in trade union activities.

6.5 | Gendered contradictions within trade unions

As in other sectors in Nepal (Grossman-Thompson, 2020) and across the world, unequal gender relations were also perceived to be reproduced by union activists themselves although this was seen by women worker activists as something which was possible, and indeed imperative, to change.

This was underlined by several of our interviews. A (male) District President of CUPPEC when asked about the gender wage gap in construction stated that “this is the practice ...men and women helpers do the same job but the men are more efficient and can do more difficult tasks so they are paid higher rates,” thus reaffirming the patriarchal status quo. A contractor in Kavre who was also an active member of the union responded similarly to questions about unequal pay, simply saying with a smile, “this is how it is here.” At the strategy meeting, women construction worker emphasized that the research findings should be shared with middle-level men leaders from their union, who were themselves engaged in construction work. These leaders were often petty contractors, suggesting that intersectional class/gender inequalities were also to an extent reproduced in union structures.

Meena, herself a union official, explained, “if men who are senior union office bearers are asked, they will say ‘everything is fine, there is no discrimination,’ because they are not in the field. We need to have programmes for district leaders, who are often small contractors employing 15–20 women, then they will start to realize they can improve their own practices.”

6.6 | Expanding the scope of workers' struggles

A key theme that emerged in discussions with women workers who were union activists was that they wanted their unions to broaden the scope of their work. Several of the demands they raised were addressed to the state and related to their status as informal workers, arguing that they were excluded from the benefits of employment legislation such as maternity pay and needed direct state provision, “We work when we can get work—there’s no regular work. Who will give maternity pay? The government has to do that!” Free childcare provision was another demand repeatedly raised in these discussions.

Equally significant was their emphasis on the need to campaign for implementation of laws on gender-based violence, which were routinely ignored. This included sexual abuse in the workplace: they wanted unions to push for implementation by the courts of new legislation which recognized self-defense against sexual harassment and assault as a legitimate defense, citing the case they had taken up of Sajni, a union member who had been fined and jailed for several days after hitting her attacker with a brick.

But beyond the workplace, demands also encompassed interlinked experiences of both the household and the state. Our participants raised the need for the implementation of the previous year’s criminalization of marital rape, linking police failure to pursue cases with the gender/class/caste based stigmatization of women construction workers discussed earlier: “Even women police will say, ‘you probably went with someone else, otherwise why would your husband beat you?’ They are verbally abusive, saying ‘these women fight and then make up at night.’ There should be respect and dignity, only then will women file cases” (Meena, strategy meeting).

Participants also emphasized the gendered aspects of Nepal’s citizenship laws, which effectively prevent women from passing on citizenship to their children unless they can provide proof that the children’s father is a Nepali citizen. Marriage certificates were also frequently demanded in order to officially register their own citizenship. This was seen as not only discriminatory—particularly penalizing single mothers who make up a significant proportion of construction workers—but as reinforcing patriarchal power and violence, and further deepening precarity for women construction workers denied citizenship by restricting their access to services. As Kamala from Lalitpur district explained: “Even when you go to deposit money in the bank, they ask you for your citizenship. But many workers in this field have left abusive husbands. So many of us don’t have citizenship.”

7 | CONCLUSION

The women construction workers who spoke to us powerfully conveyed the embodied experiences of gendered informal and precarious work in construction in Nepal. Taking up work in a growing construction sector was an important survival strategy particularly for women who had become de facto heads of household, and in the context of a coercively narrow set of options, was often preferred to other possibilities such as domestic work. However, this work was also experienced as exhausting and dangerous, chronically insecure and underpaid, and routinely marked by various forms of abuse, which Dalit women and Janajati women explained as shaped not only by class relations but by intersecting oppressions of gender and caste.

The participants also testified to acute time poverty and lack of leisure in the context of a highly unequal gender division of reproductive labor. However, this has been ignored in policy interventions based on further intensifying women's labor. Nepal's globally funded training scheme for women masons focuses on improving so-called "human capital" through training and ignores patriarchal structures in the construction industry and beyond. Consequently, very few women who received mason training have been able to find work as masons.

Whereas the dominant Smart Economics approach, which informs initiatives such as the mason training scheme, is rooted in constructions of hyperindustrious entrepreneurialism combined with gendered expectations of altruism, the participants conveyed the centrality of notions of the collective to the strategies they adopted as workers.

Participants repeatedly invoked bonds of mutual support and information sharing with other women workers as essential to survival; these both facilitated their entry into the work and made it possible to negotiate exploitative and oppressive working conditions. However, acute power imbalances between workers and the employers and contractors meant the latter could frequently mobilize patriarchal gendered norms of behavior to discipline and control workers' assertion. A growing number of women construction workers are members of unions, and this made a significant difference in enabling them to effectively challenge this.

Struggles for dignity and respect, inflected by gender, caste, and class, were as central to women construction workers' narratives of union organizing as those for improved pay and conditions.

Women construction worker activists also emphasized that men who were middle-level union leaders often reproduced unequal gender relations and pushed for this to change. Further, women construction worker activists clearly articulated a need to extend the scope of what their unions can and should demand, challenging boundaries between "public" and "private" spheres and between demands on the employer and on the state. This has implied a radical re-envisioning of workers' struggles to encompass, as well as the workplace, gender relations in the "private" realm of the household, and the gendered public institutions which sustain these relations and instrumentalize them to reinforce insecurity and precarity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank all the women construction workers and union activists who shared their time, experiences, insights, and analyses with us. Shanta Basnet, Vice-President and head of the women's section of the Central Union of Painters, Plumbers, Electro and Construction Workers-Nepal (CUPECC), gave us invaluable help. We would also like to thank in particular Seira Tamang and Sangita Thebe Limbu for their reflections on some of the themes of this article, and three anonymous reviewers for their comments. The research on which this article is based was funded by grants from the London International Development Centre and the Global Challenges Research Fund (Birkbeck).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None of the authors have a conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ We had initially planned to include women working within public road building projects in the study but this was ultimately not possible. While there is some existing research on conditions for women engaged in this work (see Ghosh & Chopra, 2019), more research is needed into the possibilities for collective organizing among these workers.
- ² All the discussions and interviews with construction workers and trade union activists and leaders were carried out in Nepali and subsequently transcribed and translated into English by two of the authors.
- ³ The press conference led to at least three articles in the Nepali and English mainstream press and television coverage by a national broadcaster.
- ⁴ Joshi Rajkarnikar and Ramnarain (2020) noted that when wives of male outmigrants are included, one in four households in Nepal is estimated to be headed by a woman.
- ⁵ All names of construction workers have been changed to protect their anonymity.
- ⁶ This has also been the experience of women construction workers in India and elsewhere (Bowers, 2019, p. 30).
- ⁷ In her study of the working lives of women tempo drivers in Kathmandu, Grossman-Thomas (2020) also refers to informal strategies of collective resistance, which she describes as “meso-level” coping strategies.
- ⁸ Negotiated wage rates were almost always higher than the government mandated minimum wages; unions were demanding that the minimum wage must be increased to be meaningful.

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How to cite this article: Wilson, Kalpana, Feyzi Ismail, Sambriddhi Kharel, and Swechchha Dahal. 2023. "Women Construction Workers in Nepal: Collectivities Under Precarious Conditions." *Gender, Work & Organization*: 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13078>.