

Original Paper

Struggle for Life: Gender, Informality, and Resistance Among Women Construction Workers in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This article examines the complex and often overlooked experiences of Bangladeshi women employed in the construction sector. These women face intersecting challenges including gender-based discrimination, social stigma, occupational hazards, and economic exploitation. Based on qualitative fieldwork including in-depth interviews with 20 women laborers at rural and semi-urban construction sites at Kurigram district in Bangladesh this study employs a feminist political economy lens to unpack how societal norms, labor practices, and policy gaps shape the realities of women construction workers. Findings reveal structural barriers to equality and safety, alongside narratives of resilience, community support, and resistance. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy reforms and advocacy strategies to enhance the protection, recognition, and empowerment of women in construction work.

Keywords

women construction workers, gender inequality, labor exploitation, social protection, feminist political economy, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

In recent decades, Bangladesh's socio-economic trajectory has been shaped by rapid urbanization, industrial expansion, and a shift toward infrastructure-based development. The construction industry, in particular, has emerged as a key driver of economic growth, contributing significantly to national GDP and employment World Bank (2022). From the development of urban housing and commercial complexes to public infrastructure such as bridges, roads, and flyovers, construction activity has transformed the urban landscape (Planning Commission, 2020). This transformation, however, comes with a complex and often hidden labor dynamic, especially when it comes to gender.

Despite the visibility of construction projects, the labor that sustains them remains largely informal and under-regulated. The industry relies heavily on manual labor, with workers employed through verbal

agreements and without access to legal or social protections (ILO, 2021). In this context, women's participation in construction has seen a quiet but steady rise. However, this rise has not been accompanied by recognition or rights. Women workers are overwhelmingly found in the most physically demanding and least rewarding roles. They are excluded from skill-based tasks, paid less than their male counterparts, and subjected to unsafe and unhygienic working conditions (BILS, 2020). The stigma associated with women performing manual labor in public spaces only adds to their challenges.

Most women enter the construction workforce in Bangladesh not by choice but out of compulsion, driven by rural poverty, landlessness, widowhood, abandonment, and domestic violence. These socio-economic and personal hardships often force women to migrate to urban or peri-urban centers, where construction work is one of the few income-generating options available to unskilled and marginalized female laborers (Action Aid Bangladesh, 2019). Their experiences reflect not only economic vulnerability but also a deep-seated gender bias that pervades both the workplace and the broader societal structure.

This article aims to shed light on the everyday realities of women construction workers in rural and semi-urban settings of northern part of Bangladesh. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, the study draws on in-depth interviews, participant observations, and narrative accounts to understand the multidimensional nature of their struggles. It documents their entry into the sector, the tasks they perform, the challenges they face in terms of harassment, wage discrimination, and health risks, and the coping mechanisms they develop in the absence of institutional support.

The article is structured across several key sections. The theoretical background outlines the Marxist feminist and intersectional political economy frameworks used to analyze the data. The objectives section clarifies the specific aims of the study, while the research area description contextualizes the fieldwork within labor geography. The methodology section explains the narrative and thematic strategies employed to gather and interpret data. The discussion offers a thematic analysis of the participants' lived experiences, organized around key areas such as socio-economic background, gendered labor practices, workplace harassment, and resistance strategies. The findings synthesize these insights into broader structural patterns, and the recommendations suggest practical policy and programmatic reforms. The article concludes with a reflection on the implications for gender justice, labor rights, and inclusive development.

By centering the voices of women who have long been marginalized in academic research and policy discourse, this study offers a nuanced portrait of an invisible workforce. It argues that recognizing and safeguarding the rights of women construction workers is not only a matter of economic justice but a necessary step toward a more equitable and humane development paradigm in Bangladesh.

2. Theoretical Background

This study draws upon an interdisciplinary body of feminist theory, particularly Marxist feminism, intersectional feminist political economy, and the capability and agency framework of Amartya Sen. These theoretical lenses allow for a comprehensive analysis of the conditions and lived experiences of

women construction workers, shedding light on the socio-economic structures, gender hierarchies, and power relations that frame their labor.

Marxist feminism, as articulated by Sylvia Federici (2004) and Maria Mies (1986), emphasizes how capitalist systems depend on the unpaid or underpaid labor of women. Federici introduces the concept of “social reproduction”—the essential yet invisible labor, often performed by women, that sustains the workforce and the capitalist economy. Construction work, while technically paid labor, becomes an extension of this reproductive burden as women take on strenuous physical roles that mirror their domestic responsibilities, without adequate remuneration or recognition. Mies expands this understanding globally, arguing that capitalist patriarchy exploits women in the Global South through both economic and ideological means, imposing dual burdens of paid and unpaid labor on women, while simultaneously denying them rights and visibility.

Crucially, the intersectionality framework advanced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) provides the methodological basis for understanding how women in rural Bangladesh, such as those in Master Para, experience overlapping systems of oppression—gender, class, caste, and political disenfranchisement. Intersectionality captures the multi-dimensional nature of discrimination: women workers in construction are not only marginalized as women but also as informal workers, rural citizens, and politically unconnected individuals.

This study also engages with the concept of agency as elaborated by Amartya Sen in his seminal work on gender and cooperative conflicts. Sen (1990) shifts the focus from women as passive victims to agents of change. Agency, for Sen, refers to the ability of individuals to pursue goals they value and to act upon the world around them. Even within constrained socio-economic conditions, women in Master Para exercise agency in nuanced ways—by entering construction work to support their families, resisting wage discrimination, or investing in their children’s education. This emphasis on agency allows the study to highlight not just oppression but also resilience and aspiration.

Furthermore, the ideas presented in publications such as Whitehead’s (1981) “I’m Hungry Mum: The Politics of Domestic Budgeting” and Cornwall’s (2002) “Arguing with the Crocodile” offer insights into everyday forms of negotiation and resistance within patriarchal households. These texts explore how women make complex trade-offs and navigate within rigid structures to assert their autonomy and safeguard their interests. In the context of construction work, this means managing precarious employment while sustaining households, negotiating with employers for better conditions, or challenging social stigma through collective solidarity.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives enable this study to move beyond a deficit model of rural women’s labor and toward a more dynamic understanding of their positionality. They illuminate how women’s labor in construction is embedded in and shaped by broader systems of gender, class, and economic governance, while also foregrounding the ways in which women contest, adapt, and survive within these systems.

These frameworks inform every aspect of this study—from research design to analysis—helping to identify the interlocking forms of inequality that shape women’s construction labor, and the forms of resistance and resilience that emerge within this challenging terrain.

3. Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to investigate and document the lived experiences of women engaged in construction work in Bangladesh, with a specific focus on the rural and semi-urban area. The study aims to contribute to academic and development discourse and inform policy through the following specific objectives:

- To trace the socio-economic and familial backgrounds of women who enter construction work.
- To identify the nature of their labor, including the types of tasks they perform and the challenges they face.
- To explore gender-based wage disparities and other forms of discrimination in the workplace.
- To understand the health, safety, and social issues associated with their work.
- To examine the forms of agency, resistance, and resilience exhibited by women workers.
- To propose actionable policy and programmatic interventions aimed at improving their lives.

4. Methodology

This research employed a qualitative, narrative inquiry methodology suitable for capturing complex, lived experiences. Twenty women construction workers were selected using purposive sampling. Criteria included age, years of experience, marital status, and willingness to participate. All interviews were conducted in Bengali using a semi-structured format, recorded with permission, and later transcribed and translated into English.

The primary method of data collection was in-depth interviews, supported by participant observation and informal discussions. Fieldwork spanned a four-month period, allowing the researcher to engage with participants in multiple settings—worksites, homes, and communal spaces. Observational notes focused on work routines, gendered task allocation, interactions with supervisors, and conditions of labor.

Thematic analysis was employed to process the data. Codes were generated inductively and refined through multiple readings. Ethical protocols were strictly maintained, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms to protect identities.

5. Description of the Research Area

The study was conducted in Master Para village of Nageswari Upazila, located in Kurigram district in the northwestern part of Bangladesh. This area is one of the most economically marginalized and environmentally vulnerable regions in the country. Kurigram district is frequently affected by natural disasters, especially seasonal flooding and river erosion, which exacerbate the structural poverty of the region. The socio-economic conditions in this area are characterized by food insecurity, landlessness,

chronic unemployment, and limited access to education and healthcare services. These persistent challenges have created a setting of systemic deprivation where alternative income-generating opportunities are few and far between.

Master Para is a typical rural village within this socio-economic context. The settlement is primarily composed of smallholder and landless families. Social classification within the community is largely determined by access to land and political affiliation. A small group of relatively affluent landowners dominate local politics and resources, while the majority of households survive through casual labor, sharecropping, or seasonal work. The dependency on agriculture has declined due to soil degradation and irregular monsoon cycles, pushing more residents—particularly women—into non-agricultural and informal forms of labor such as construction.

The economic structure of Master Para reflects a transition from subsistence agriculture to fragmented, informal livelihoods. The male population frequently migrates for work, leaving behind women who take on the dual responsibilities of earning and caregiving. A significant proportion of the women are widowed, divorced, or abandoned, increasing their economic vulnerability. They are compelled to work as day laborers in local and nearby urban construction sites within the upazila boundaries—often traveling by foot or on rented rickshaws to access work opportunities.

Socially, Master Para is deeply influenced by patriarchal norms that regulate gender roles and restrict women's mobility. The dominant gender ideology assigns women to the domestic sphere and views wage labor—particularly construction work—as inappropriate or shameful for women. Women construction workers thus operate within a context of intense social scrutiny and stigma. They are often considered dishonorable or morally lax, particularly if they work in mixed-gender environments. Despite this, the economic imperatives of survival have led many women to defy these norms and assert their right to work.

A further complexity in the local socio-political structure is the dominance of patron-client relationships mediated by local political elites. Local governance structures such as Union Parishads (Note) often function through partisan networks, with access to state resources and social protection programs contingent on political alignment. Women construction workers from politically marginalized households are systematically excluded from government safety nets, including food rationing, employment generation schemes, and social safety allowances. This entrenched politicization of entitlements reinforces both gender and class-based exclusion.

The geographic isolation of Master Para, combined with its economic hardship and conservative social structure, thus creates a multi-layered context of marginalization. It is within this environment that the study explores the experiences of women engaged in construction work—highlighting how their labor is shaped not only by economic necessity but also by intersecting forces of gender, class, and political exclusion. By grounding the research in Master Para, this study offers a detailed, place-based understanding of the broader structural forces driving women's participation in rural and semi-urban construction work across Bangladesh.

6. Discussion

The narratives of women construction workers in Master Para reveal a complex interplay of economic necessity, social constraint, and personal agency. Their daily lives and work experiences are structured by deep-rooted inequalities embedded in household systems, market participation, community perception, and political exclusion. This discussion presents the key themes that emerged from the fieldwork, offering a richer understanding of the intersection between gender, labor, and rural livelihoods.

6.1 Household System and Intra-family Roles

Women construction workers live within extended or nuclear family systems where they are often the primary earners. Most of the participants were widows, divorced, or wives of sick or absent husbands. Their households typically consist of dependent children, elderly parents, or in-laws. Despite their economic contributions, these women are rarely recognized as heads of households or decision-makers. Household budgeting, food distribution, and children's education are largely managed by the women, yet ownership of property and control over significant financial decisions remain with male family members or in-laws.

Many participants described tensions between their income-earning responsibilities and societal expectations that women should remain confined to domestic roles. The double burden of earning and caregiving is prevalent, with women laboring in construction by day and handling all household chores after returning home. This dynamic reflects what Whitehead (1981) described as the "politics of domestic budgeting," where women silently shoulder the responsibility for household sustenance without commensurate power or recognition.

6.2 Women and the Market

Engagement in construction labor has offered women an entry point into the market economy, albeit on its most exploitative terms. Women access construction jobs through informal labor networks, often via male relatives or neighbors. They are excluded from skilled tasks and are employed in physically demanding, low-status roles. The market treats them as a disposable workforce, valued only for their endurance and compliance. Wage discrimination is rampant, with women consistently paid 30-50% less than men for equivalent work.

Moreover, the absence of contracts and legal protections places them at constant risk of wage denial and sudden termination. Participants recounted several instances where wages were withheld or reduced arbitrarily by contractors. This informal, unregulated market structure reflects broader patterns of gender-based exclusion and exploitation that mirror both global capitalist norms and local patriarchal systems.

6.3 Coalition and Bargaining

In response to these injustices, women have begun forming informal coalitions with co-workers. These networks function as spaces of solidarity, emotional support, and sometimes collective action. While these coalitions lack formal organizational structures, they represent an emerging form of agency and resistance. In some cases, groups of women have collectively bargained for wage increases or better work conditions.

These informal groups also act as information-sharing hubs—warning each other about abusive contractors, discussing work opportunities, or sharing knowledge about social support schemes. Although these efforts are nascent and fragmented, they signal a growing consciousness among women laborers about their rights and the potential strength of collective bargaining.

6.4 Economic and Political Decision-Making

Despite their increasing economic role, women construction workers remain largely excluded from formal political spaces. They have limited access to local governance institutions, and few have ever attended Union Parishad meetings or participated in local elections. Most women expressed skepticism about political promises and described government programs as inaccessible due to corruption or political bias.

Access to government benefits—such as social safety nets, food aid, or employment guarantees—is frequently mediated by local political elites. Women not aligned with dominant political factions are often overlooked. This exclusion reflects the deeply entrenched politicization of resource allocation in rural Bangladesh and highlights the intersection of gender and political marginalization.

6.5 Economic Empowerment but Social Marginalization

Ironically, while construction work provides women with a degree of economic independence, it also subjects them to heightened social stigma. Community members often perceive women construction workers as morally suspect or deviant for engaging in manual labor, especially in public or mixed-gender spaces. Many participants reported facing insults, gossip, or social exclusion.

This stigma extends to marriage prospects for younger women and creates additional burdens for mothers, whose labor is viewed as undermining the traditional family structure. Thus, women who contribute economically to their families are simultaneously disempowered socially, creating a paradox of economic empowerment amid social marginalization.

6.6 Social Attitudes Toward Women Laborers

The pervasive negative attitudes toward women laborers in Master Para are deeply embedded in conservative gender norms. Labor performed by women outside the home is viewed with suspicion and often considered dishonorable. Their presence at construction sites—spaces historically associated with male labor—challenges traditional notions of femininity, respectability, and familial roles. Consequently, these women face widespread social stigma, regardless of their intentions or responsibilities.

Women construction workers are often labeled as characterless or unworthy of trust. Their participation in construction, especially in mixed-gender environments, makes them targets of gossip, public scrutiny, and even direct verbal abuse. Several participants shared experiences of being mocked by neighbors or chastised by elders in the community. This contributes to social isolation and a sense of personal insecurity, reinforcing the marginalization they already experience at work.

Their social interactions at the workplace are often marked by careful negotiation. Many women collaborate with one another to complete physically taxing tasks, share information about fair employers, and rotate responsibilities during times of illness or family emergency. These interactions create a sense

of solidarity and companionship, acting as informal support systems in the absence of institutional protections. Cooperative relations among women workers allow them to preserve dignity, manage risks, and, at times, raise concerns collectively to contractors.

In contrast, their relationships with male coworkers are marked by a mix of cooperation, dependency, and caution. While some male coworkers respect the women's effort and help in their tasks, others engage in harassment or exploit their vulnerability. Women navigate these dynamics carefully, often relying on older or more experienced female workers to mediate conflicts or advise on how to avoid trouble.

Bargaining with employers remains an uphill battle. Women reported that contractors and site managers often dismiss their complaints, delay payments, or offer lower wages with impunity. Attempts to protest individually are frequently met with threats of dismissal. Even collective appeals are rarely entertained unless they are backed by male intermediaries. This has led to a growing sense of frustration among the women, who feel trapped in a system that exploits their labor while denying them dignity, fair treatment, or recognition.

Ultimately, the partial and politically biased system—where access to state support is governed by party allegiance and patriarchal patronage—has left women construction workers alienated and disillusioned. Their frustrations stem not only from material deprivation but also from the lack of justice and voice. Yet, despite the pervasive discrimination and institutional neglect, these women continue to assert their presence in a hostile labor market—an act of resistance in itself.

7. Findings

The findings from this research clearly demonstrate that women construction workers in Master Para and the surrounding areas experience a complex array of challenges that are structural, social, economic, and political in nature. These findings are derived from both the in-depth interviews and the researcher's prolonged engagement in the field. They highlight recurring patterns that affect the lives and labor of women workers, while also underscoring their resilience, agency, and resistance within a highly unequal system.

Key findings include:

- **Persistent Wage Discrimination:** Despite performing equally or more physically demanding labor, women consistently earn lower wages than their male counterparts. Wage disparity is normalized in both rural and urban construction sites, and there is little to no accountability or enforcement of wage equality.
- **Informality and Lack of Legal Protections:** Women construction workers operate outside the formal labor regime. There are no contracts, benefits, or grievance mechanisms. They have no access to labor unions or collective bargaining structures, leaving them vulnerable to arbitrary dismissal and wage theft.

- **Insecure and Unsafe Working Conditions:** Women work in hazardous environments without protective gear, clean drinking water, toilets, or basic first-aid. These risks are amplified by their exclusion from safety protocols and lack of workplace regulation.
- **Social Marginalization Despite Economic Contribution:** While women contribute significantly to household income, they face stigma both within the home and the community. Their labor is undervalued and often regarded as dishonorable, leading to social isolation and strained familial relations.
- **Heavy Domestic Burdens and Gendered Expectations:** Women not only work at construction sites but also shoulder the entire burden of unpaid domestic care. Their time, energy, and bodies are stretched between physical labor and household responsibilities, leaving little room for rest or personal development.
- **Exclusion from Political Processes and State Benefits:** Access to social protection programs and government assistance is politicized. Women from politically marginalized families are routinely excluded from safety net initiatives such as food relief, employment generation schemes, and health services.
- **Emerging Forms of Solidarity and Resistance:** Despite institutional neglect, women are developing informal coalitions for mutual support and protection. They share work-related information, negotiate small wage increases collectively, and support each other during times of illness or family emergencies.
- **Frustration with a Partisan and Patriarchal System:** Women expressed deep frustration over being exploited by employers, ignored by local governance, and judged by society. Many articulated a desire for structural change, but felt powerless in the face of systemic discrimination and political exclusion.

These findings affirm that women construction workers are embedded in a layered system of exploitation but are not passive victims. Their stories reveal a deep consciousness of injustice and a persistent—if limited—effort to challenge their conditions. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic policy response that acknowledges the intersection of labor, gender, class, and governance in shaping the lived experiences of women construction workers.

8. Recommendations

Based on the complex realities uncovered in this study, addressing the challenges faced by women construction workers requires a multi-tiered, structural response involving policy reform, community engagement, and institutional accountability. The recommendations are rooted in the lived experiences of the women interviewed and grounded in the feminist political economy framework that guided this research.

- **Legal and Policy Recognition of Women Construction Workers:** Women construction workers remain outside the coverage of formal labor legislation. It is critical that national labor policies

explicitly recognize informal and rural women construction workers. This includes their right to minimum wages, safe working conditions, and legal protection from discrimination and abuse.

- **Enforcement of Equal Pay for Equal Work:** Gender-based wage disparity is a systemic issue. The government must implement and monitor strict enforcement mechanisms for the Equal Remuneration Act. Wage inspections, grievance redressal platforms, and public reporting systems should be introduced to ensure transparency and accountability at all levels of the construction industry.
- **Implementation of Gender-Sensitive Workplace Standards:** Construction companies and contractors must be mandated to provide gender-sensitive infrastructure at worksites. This includes safe and hygienic sanitation facilities, clean drinking water, rest areas, and the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) suited for women workers. Occupational health services should be made accessible and gender-responsive.
- **Expansion of Social Protection Coverage:** Women construction workers should be automatically enrolled in public safety net programs, including maternity benefits, health insurance, subsidized food distribution, and old-age pensions. Political affiliation should not determine access to entitlements; instead, need-based and inclusive systems must be established to reach politically and socially marginalized women.
- **Training and Skill Development for Upward Mobility:** Targeted vocational training programs must be introduced to enable women to transition from unskilled to semi-skilled or skilled positions in the construction sector. These programs should also include financial literacy, leadership development, and digital access training to support broader empowerment.
- **Support for Unionization and Collective Bargaining:** Women workers need platforms to organize and voice their demands. The state, NGOs, and labor rights organizations should support the formation of women-led workers' associations or cooperatives. These groups can advocate for rights, safety, and fair treatment while building a culture of collective bargaining and solidarity.
- **Community and Cultural Transformation Initiatives:** Stigma and negative social attitudes toward women in construction must be tackled through sustained community dialogue, awareness campaigns, and engagement with religious and traditional leaders. Media, schools, and local institutions should be leveraged to shift narratives and normalize women's labor in public spaces.
- **Decentralized and Inclusive Governance Mechanisms:** Local governance bodies like Union Parishads should establish participatory forums where women construction workers can raise concerns and contribute to local development planning. Transparent and depoliticized access to resources should be ensured, with grievance systems to address exclusion and bias.
- **Research, Monitoring, and Advocacy:** Longitudinal research and data collection must be institutionalized to track the conditions of women workers in the informal sector. Regular monitoring and participatory evaluation should feed into advocacy strategies targeting national and local policymakers, ensuring that interventions remain evidence-based and responsive.

- **Cross-Sector Collaboration and Investment:** The responsibility for change cannot rest on one actor. Government agencies, donor institutions, private sector contractors, civil society organizations, and trade unions must collaborate to build a coherent, well-resourced strategy for empowering women in the construction sector.

9. Conclusion

This study has illuminated the intricate and intersecting dimensions of gender, class, and labor within the construction sector in rural Bangladesh. Through a detailed ethnographic inquiry in Master Para of Nageswari Upazila, the research traced the socio-political contours that shape the lives of women who enter construction labor not out of choice but compulsion. These women inhabit the lowest rungs of the rural labor market, one that is deeply gendered, informal, and exploitative. Their labor is simultaneously indispensable and invisible—essential to both local infrastructure and household survival, yet rendered unrecognized and unsupported.

The construction labor market in Bangladesh remains a site of stark male dominance and patriarchal control. Skill-intensive roles are largely monopolized by men, while women are confined to low-paid, physically taxing, and insecure work. Their absence from contracts, social protections, and labor unions perpetuates a cycle of dependency and exclusion. The power asymmetry between male contractors, male coworkers, and female laborers reinforces existing hierarchies and restricts women's bargaining power. Within this broader labor market framework, patriarchal structures further regulate and suppress women's agency. Social norms and familial ideologies conflate women's labor with moral laxity, thereby discouraging their economic participation. Community stigma, combined with the burden of unpaid care responsibilities, means that economic empowerment does not automatically translate into social mobility or dignity. Instead, women construction workers often face the paradox of becoming the breadwinners while remaining socially marginalized.

Yet, the study also brings forth compelling stories of agency, resistance, and resilience. From forming informal coalitions to quietly asserting their right to work, these women negotiate their place within a hostile labor economy. They embody a silent revolution—reshaping gender norms not through formal protest, but through their everyday acts of survival and solidarity. Their narratives compel us to reimagine what empowerment looks like in a context of structural deprivation.

The findings affirm that meaningful change cannot occur through piecemeal interventions alone. Structural transformation is necessary—starting with legal recognition of women's labor, inclusive governance, and equitable access to social protections. Moreover, shifting public perception and dismantling patriarchal norms must accompany policy reforms.

In sum, the struggle of women construction workers is not only a fight for fair wages or safer workplaces; it is a fight for recognition, respect, and rights in a system designed to silence them. This study hopes to amplify their voices and place their realities at the center of development and labor discourse in Bangladesh. True gender justice demands nothing less.

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Note

The lowest tier of government unit in rural Bangladesh.