

Female Labour in Construction Sector During The COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract

Empirical gender focuses on how men and women are differently affected by and affect the political economy. The COVID-19 epidemic will inevitably result in changes and difficulties in the workplace. According to preliminary data, women would be disproportionately impacted by the pandemic in comparison to men. Emphasising the female workforce in construction sector, this investigation looks at the difficulties brought on by modifications in their work circumstances, the tactics they used to deal with the difficulties, and their viewpoints examines the employment status of female employees throughout the pandemic. The outcomes reveals that the following issues rank highest: (i) being overworked; (ii) working space; (iv) teamwork; (v) parenting; and (iii) social connections. The tactics that are most frequently mentioned to overcome these obstacles are: (i) more visual communication; (ii) a committed workplace; (iv) flexible work schedules; (iii) self-scheduling; and (v) breaking separating personal time from business time.

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Introduction

It is easy to find evidence that women in construction have encountered career-related obstacles prior to the COVID era, given that they represent a minority group in one of the most male-dominated industries with a high degree of gender segregation. According to the previous studies, the most frequently mentioned obstacles include the inability to manage work and family obligations, gender stereotypes, and the unprofessional labour practices and procedures of construction companies, among others. There is a growing body of research on how the pandemic has affected the labour market in many nations, some of which have used a gender lens in their methodology. These studies offer preliminary proof that women experience hardship. The majority of these research indicate that this gender gap may result from women's increased need to manage their paid workload while performing unpaid domestic labour (housework and caregiving) in the wake of the COVID lockdowns.

A significant disturbance to work environments during the pandemic is the abrupt change to a different work environment. Raišienė et al. (2020), however, listed a lengthy list of 29 issues. These include: a lack of in-person interactions with co-workers; a blurring of the lines between work and personal life; an

uninspired work environment; difficulties with self-motivation; and interruptions from other family members. As far as the authors are aware, there is currently no research that concentrates specifically on the construction workforce. However, the challenges and strategies related to the pandemic identified in the literature might also be applicable to various other professions. Thus this exploratory research is a humble attempt into the study of employment circumstances of women in the construction sector post the COVID-19 pandemic (specifically between August and September 2023).

Objective

This present study has explored the challenges associated with changes of the job situations, the adopted strategies in addressing the challenges and the views on employment situation of women workforce in the construction sector of Chennai city during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research methodology

The survey design reaches the target group is the female workers in the Chennai metropolitan construction industry at least 18 years above. The data was collected using a questionnaire distributed among 50 samples. The survey questionnaire used open-ended questions that allow respondents to respond and provide detailed answers without the bias associated with limiting responses to pre-determined alternative. This type of question is of practical importance in this study, with the intention of exploring topics of interest following the unprecedented disruptions caused by the pandemic. First, respondents were asked to specify the main challenges associated with changes in their employment status, workplace, and work schedules (Q1). This was followed by questions about the strategies they adopted to overcome each of the main challenges (Q2). Finally, they were asked to share their views on the employment situation of women workers during the pandemic (T3). Thematic analysis was conducted to identify, analyze, and report trends (themes) within the data. This analytical method is suitable for questions that relate to people's experiences, or people's views and perceptions, which are the focus of this study. The choice is also justified by its flexibility: Identifying emerging themes that can provide a rich and detailed description of the data Ability to capture possible unexpected responses from respondents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Brown and Clark's (2006) six-stage process was adopted for the analysis process. The authors independently reviewed and analyzed the qualitative data and identified key themes within the data. These phases included understanding the dataset, coding, generating initial themes, revising themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting results. The analysis itself was a recursive process, with movement back and forth between different phases to facilitate a rigorous process of exploring and engaging with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Results

The COVID-19 epidemic has caused significant stress on individuals from all walks of life worldwide, which may account for the response rate even if the quantity of replies is rather low for a study using this recruitment approach. Notably, the respondents had the choice to exclude their responses to the open-ended questions. However, it is exciting to see that several respondents provide a rich qualitative dataset for the research by mentioning several important issues and/or tactics in their answers, as well as their thoughts on women's employment circumstances during the pandemic. Their enthusiasm and sincerity in freely sharing their experiences appear to be reflected in their desire to spend time answering the optional open-ended questions. Consequently, their answers are helpful and pertinent to

this preliminary investigation. The vast majority of them (72.5percentage) were in the 26–45 age range. Below Table 1.1 demonstrates the difficulties brought on by three types of changes in the respondents' work circumstances—employment status, work location, and working hours during the epidemic. Based on frequency counts in each category, the identified issues were rated from highest to lowest. Note that some respondents mentioned more than one challenge, therefore this frequency count does not represent the total number of respondents. Additionally, some difficulties are the same as one or more changes in work environments. For instance, the majority of the difficulties arising from a shift in work location also apply to shifts in working hours. Dealing with job loss during the pandemic, which had an impact on a tiny percentage of respondents, was the most often mentioned barrier for changes in employment status.

Table 1.1

Changes in employment status	
Loss of job	8
Less income (or pay cut)	5
Went from full-time to part-time	2
Changes in work environment	
Working space	25
Social interactions	35
Collaboration/ communication	17
Children/ parenting	25
Work stress	25
Motivation	4
Distractions	5
Physical/ mental health	16
Work-life balance	16
Overworked	18

The approaches employed by the participants to tackle the difficulties linked with the alterations in their employment circumstances throughout the pandemic. These approaches have been categorized according to the corresponding frequency tally in separate categories. Comparable to the recognized difficulties, several approaches. Those strategies are showed in below Table 1.2

Table 1.2

Strategies taken for Changes in employment status	
Looking for new job	30
Changed job	15
Negotiated redundancy	10
Strategies taken for Changes in work environment	
Increased visual communication	44

Maintain strong and consistent connections with family	15
Asked for flexible working arrangements	4
Breaking out work time and personal time	4
Self-adaptation	2

Because of the difficulty of losing or having less money, respondents would budget their spending. But in spite of the noted similarities in the current study's findings offer a novel perspective that more accurately captures the difficulties people have faced when their work locations and hours changed as a result of the COVID lockdowns.

Conclusions

The women in construction had experienced multiple challenges and the evidence is suggestive that most challenges are interrelated. Likewise, the strategies adopted by the respondents are multi-level and interdependent. Results of a content analysis show that the top ranked challenges are: (i) overworked; (ii) working space; (iii) social interactions; (iv) collaboration; and (v) parenting. The most cited strategies in addressing these challenges are: (i) increased visual communication; (ii) a dedicated workspace; (iii) self-scheduling; (iv) flexible working arrangements; and (v) breaking out work time and personal time. While the respondents highlight the increased caring and domestic responsibilities among women workforce, it is important to recognize there exists divergent experiences and opinions among the respondents given their varied personal circumstances (including family responsibilities), work location and job characteristics before and during the pandemic. Unfortunately, given the fact that the pandemic will not end in the short term and some countries are grappling with contagion waves, changes and challenges in employment are inevitable and may continue for some time. Thus, an understanding the challenges employees have had faced due to disruptive changes during the pandemic, and an insight into the possible strategies are critical in addressing human resource management challenges. The findings have implications for employing organizations in construction businesses on how to better support women workforce in their organization during a pandemic through the development of appropriate protocols. Indeed, under the uncertainty about the duration of the pandemic and future contagion waves, it is logical to suggest that these protocols are deemed necessary in addressing the challenges of retention of women workforce during and post COVID-19 pandemic. There are limitations in this exploratory study. The focus here is on professional women in the construction industry and the sample size is rather small due to difficulties faced in recruitment of respondents during a pandemic outbreak. While it is felt that the present findings are useful and relevant to provide the first insight into experiences of women in construction on the subject matter, future study should include other cohorts of interest including construction tradeswomen and women labourers. Indeed, the divided opinions observed in the current study on the impacts of the pandemic on women and men have prompted the need of further study on its impacts on construction workforce regardless of gender or role. The other limitation is the limited scope of this exploratory study. In conclusion, even though there isn't a comparable study on this topic among construction labourers, many of the issues and solutions that this study identified were consistent with those that entailed other occupations throughout the pandemic.

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