**Strong Women, Weak Bodies, Muted Voices**

**Women Construction Workers in Delhi**

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If Delhi is building its way towards becoming a “global city” through mammoth infrastructure and construction projects, then what is the story of those people whose work helps put up its massive structures? The role played by women who are employed in the construction of Delhi’s megastructures is even more intriguing, for they not only become workers-earners in a vast city but continue to fulfil the role of a mother-wife-householder.

Delhi holds an important place in the imagination of India from both within and outside the country. Keeping in mind the central role the city plays as a source of power regarding matters political, economic and social, two separate habitats have developed within Delhi’s geographical space. There is the Delhi of the migrant and the non-migrant, of the rich and the poor, of the upper class and the lower class, of the haves and the have-nots. Recent reflections on the city have captured this dichotomy vividly, only because it is so neatly visible to an observer of the city.

If Delhi is building its way towards becoming a “global city” through mammoth infrastructural and construction projects, then what is the story of those people whose work helps put up its massive structures? Who are these people, building the “world-class” city? Men and women from across the country migrate to Delhi to participate in the creation of the city. But what is their experience of the process in which they participate? The role played by women who are employed in the construction of Delhi’s megastructures is even more intriguing, for they not only become workers-earners in a vast city, but continue to fulfil the role of a mother-wife-householder. How does their experience of the city contribute to their imagination of the city? Does the city acknowledge them as its citizens and do these women call the city their home?

The aim of this report is to understand the place of a migrant community of women construction workers in a transforming city and to bring out their voices and stories.

Construction sites are spread across the city, yet they are difficult spaces to access. Security guards keep a check at entrances and visitors are not welcome. Hence, it became necessary for me to find a means to access these sites through organisations that have permission to work within them. These considerations led to my collaboration with a non-governmental organisation (NGO) called Mobile Crèches, which allowed me to visit a site in Gurgaon, where they had a long-established crèche facility, and another at Dwarka, where a fully functional crèche was not yet operational. Talking to mothers who visit the crèche to feed their babies, pick up and drop their children or to just keep an eye on them, was easier as they felt safe in the setting of a school.

While most of my conversations in Gurgaon took place within the established crèche, at Dwarka they all took place outside. In Gurgaon I tried to speak to other women who did not have children to drop off or whose children did not go to the crèche, but they were afraid to communicate freely as they feared a supervisor or co-worker might overhear our conversation. I was warned on a couple of occasions to restrict myself to the walls of the school.

The Gurgaon site was very large, with over 1,000 workers, hence there was more scrutiny there. It was a deliberate choice to restrict this study to those women who are migrants and work and live at construction sites. These women live in between the city and the village, as they are not permanently settled in one place. Even if they have been in the city for over 10 years, they have kept moving from one worksite to another and along with it from one worker’s camp to another. They do not live in a slum colony of Delhi, hence they have no stability of a long-established home or address.

In order to unearth the daily lives and survival strategies of women construction workers, the use of a structured questionnaire proved to be unsuccessful. To facilitate discussions about work and family, it was a better practice, I discovered, to...
have unstructured conversations. A questionnaire or a recorder proved to be a hindrance in establishing a relationship of trust. Using these conversations and my own observations, I have developed case studies which appear throughout the text. Along with the workers, I have also included the experiences and observations of the staff at Mobile Crèches, healthcare professionals and labour rights activists. The report presented below is ethnographic, combining the voice of the migrant woman construction worker and my observations as a researcher. Language as used by the workers is mentioned at various points. Concepts such as time, space, work, city and country are explained in terms of how the women think of them.

**Existing Legal Framework**

A range of laws exist to enable the provision of safe working and living conditions for construction workers. Yet, these laws are unfamiliar to the workers themselves and are poorly implemented. None of the women I met had any knowledge of the legal requirements their employers are meant to comply with and assumed that their husbands or thekedar must know. For them it was difficult to imagine that they had any legal rights at all. The Building and Other Construction Workers’ (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act (BOCW) 1996, is the central legislation concerning labour welfare in the construction sector. The law makes it compulsory that any construction activity with more than 10 workers must follow the guidelines set by it. All the workers employed at these projects must be registered and must receive benefits provided by a welfare board and must receive a welfare fund. Workers have to register with state welfare boards, for which forms must be filled up and identification documents must be provided – the overall cost of which is not supposed to exceed Rs 50. Activist researchers interviewed complained that these forms are extremely detailed and very lengthy, making it impossible for the mostly illiterate women workers to fill out themselves. Hence, voluntary registration is very rare in Delhi. Also, only workers between the age of 18 and 60 can be registered, leaving out those outside that age bracket.

Upon registration, the board gives an identity card to the worker with which she can avail benefits. However, at both Gurgaon and Dwarka, I did not come across any registered workers. The welfare boards have been created to provide assistance to workers and act as a counsel, but till date these boards have done very little work in Delhi, says Subhash Bhatnagar of the Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangam, which has taken up the task of registering construction workers across the country. The states with powerful and well-connected construction sectors, such as Delhi and Maharashtra, have welfare boards that practically do not perform at all and when they do have welfare funds, the benefits are not distributed.

The board is meant to fix hours of work and ensure that companies provide at least one day for rest during the week. For any overtime work or work on an off day, the worker is entitled to twice her normal wage rate, which is a benefit only found in law, not in practice. Facilities that employers are meant to ensure include a regularly maintained register for all workers, which is practised but these registers are kept secret. Payment of regular wages, safe drinking water, suitable toilets connected to sewage systems, temporary living accommodation with separate cooking, bathing, washing and lavatory facilities, crèches, first-aid kits, canteens and safety guidelines are to be provided by employers, but remain conspicuous by their absence. Inspectors are to ensure that all sites comply with legislation, however Bhatnagar claims that his organisation is often the one doing the work of these inspectors or has to be after them to raid sites where workers are being exploited. Non-compliance with these standards are punishable in civil courts, however such legal action has rarely been taken in Delhi. Because construction workers are spread out across the urban expanses, move frequently and come from different states, a traditional trade union movement has not been effective in trying to organise them. Also, construction workers are sceptical about joining such movements because they do not feel that they are citizens of the city. Since their identification papers are from their own states, they fear losing their jobs and being thrown out if the union movement attracts the wrath of the police.

If there seems to be an absence of the formal and the legal on the ground then how do families of migrant workers organise their daily lives in the city? The gap between the formal and the legal, and the practised is where individual agencies take over and lead to the growth of informal, extra-legal and underground networks of associations and dependencies. By looking at aspects of work, residence, health and education, I will try to show how the informal systems, that have become the norm, operate across the two construction sites studied for this research.

**The Idea and Experience of Work and Residence**

“There is nothing beautiful about our life stories. But if you wish to hear, then I will tell you”, claimed Lakshmi, an old-timer in the construction industry. Lakshmi came to Delhi from the Bilaspur district of Chhattisgarh, some 20 years ago. Twenty years according to her calculation of time – it was actually 1984. She remembered that it was the year of Indira Gandhi’s assassination. Lakshmi then began to narrate why she and her husband chose to live away from their village. Her father-in-law had property to be divided amongst his sons, if they could buy out their share from him. Two out of four sons chose to come to the city with a thekedar from their village and began to work at construction sites. The plan was that they would work hard for a few years, buy out their share of the property and then live peacefully in the comfort of their hamlet. However, this was not to be. It has been 27 years and they are still moving from one...
construction site to another. Lakshmi’s husband began visiting a theka and they lost all their money to his alcoholism. It was a habit he picked up in the city. Fear of his family had prevented such behaviour in the village. “But what fear here? Now he fearlessly blows up our hard-earned money on alcohol and defies the pleas of his wife, his children and his brothers to give up”, Lakshmi says. Lakshmi’s father-in-law is no more and she knows that her brothers-in-law will run out of patience soon. She hopes that her husband will mend his ways before that happens.

“I try and tell him not to drink so much, but he only shouts, abuses, curses and then hits me in front of our children”, says Lakshmi remorsefully. She says there is a limit to being treated so inhumanly, but she never considers leaving her husband. Who will take care of him? What will she tell her children? So, she does what she says every woman in her line of work does – stashes away emergency money by burying it in the earth that forms the floor of her hut. I ask her about opening a bank account. She laughs, calls me naïve. She has no documentation mentioning her name, place of origin and other such details, and if there were a pressing need for cash how would she access a bank immediately? There were no bank branches located near the construction sites she had been working at.

Lakshmi presses some tobacco between her thumb and her left palm as she tells me about her children. Tobacco chewing is a vile habit the loneliness of the city has compelled her to adopt, she explains. Her children are the ones she is most worried about. Unable to send them to school in the city or keep them in the village, she lets them wander around the construction site. She never went to school, but had always believed that they would. The construction sites she has worked on had no crèches and there was no known government school in the vicinity. She complained of a terrible lack of information about educational and health institutes in the city, as it was not as compact as the village, where every dweller knew where the local school and the hospital were located. Manual labourers like Lakshmi make Rs 110 per day. The wage given by the employer is Rs 125, but Rs 15 must go to the thekedar. After all, in moments of crises it is the thekedar who will come to her rescue, even if he is corrupt. The Rs 110 is not sufficient, according to Lakshmi, for a family with children, an alcoholic husband and no filial support system to survive in a city such as Delhi. So then why live here anymore, I ask? She smiles again and says, “Par hum gareeb log hain. Ab aur kahaan jayenge?”, summing up what is an unending dilemma – where else do we go to earn a living, since we have no training, no skills and no one to tell us about any other opportunities.

Life and Work Cycle

Lakshmi’s story is a microcosm of the nature of a woman labourer’s life cycle and work cycle in the construction industry. The prospect of better employment or any employment pushes people out of villages and pulls them towards the city. The 64th round of the National Sample Survey (2010) found that in 2007-08, 25% of the population migrating to cities was employed in the construction industry. If the NSS data is compared to figures published by the International Labour Organisation on employment in India, then between 1999 and 2005, approximately 10 lakh people have been employed in the construction industry each year. The labour activist, Subhash Bhatnagar estimates that in Delhi alone, approximately 10 lakh workers are employed in construction. Hence, data sources have not been in agreement in trying to map out the numbers of men and women employed as construction workers in Delhi.

Traditionally, construction workers come in groups led by a thekedar who might be an old construction worker himself. Usually the men come first and their wives and their children follow. If the worker and his family remain attached to a thekedar then they move with him from one construction site to another. The thekedar gets a cut from the daily wages of all workers. He also becomes a point of contact in the city, and while most thekedars squeeze the workers for cash, they also lend money to them in times of need and help them in emergencies. If the male worker is bound to his thekedar, the female worker is bound to both. Her husband follows the thekedar, and she follows them both. This category of construction workers consists of two types – the cyclical and the permanent. The cyclical workers come to the city for a few months, work hard to save money and return to their villages during the harvest season or when they are needed at home. The permanent workers are those who have been living in the city for many years and do not go back to the villages often or at all. Besides the workers who accompany thekedars to the city, there are two more categories. There are more cyclical migrants who are employed directly by the contractor and pay no dues to middlemen. The last category of workers are not attached to a construction site and seek employment by collecting at Delhi’s labour chowks where contractors looking for surplus labourers hire them. Recognising the multiple categories of construction workers is important in order to understand why the data we have varies so much and why data collection can be challenging.

While construction is included as a separate employment sector for main employment in the census, most of the women workers are classified as unskilled labour. Because the categories of workers, their duration of work and their payment and contracting systems vary, the data on their numbers is not reliable, as it does not adopt such complexities in its classification.

Counting the number of women employed in Delhi’s construction sector is more complex, since the women do not receive wages directly from their employers. Their husbands or their fathers receive money on their behalf. Hence, the contractor’s muster rolls and wage books do not have accurate information on them. Since women do not receive their wages directly, there is no consensus at one construction site about their daily wage rate. At the same site women claimed that their wages are Rs 145, Rs 125 and Rs 110. All these women work under a thekedar and there
is no correlation between the number of years worked and the wage rate. Women who had been construction workers for 10 years claimed to receive lesser wages than some women who had only been working for the last six months. Do their husbands give them the money received on behalf of their labour? “Yes, they have to”, say the women, as they are responsible for maintaining the household and its needs. Just as time can be relative, so is the concept of money. They calculate how much money they earn, require and save based on their expenses. Because their expenses are of a certain amount and that is what they tend to receive from their husbands, they often estimate that must be their daily wage rate.

Women are employed at construction sites to do the unskilled work of manual labourers. They are responsible for sweeping, picking up and throwing away the rubble from the site, assisting mistris by carrying and handing out bricks and making the cement mix. No training is required for such work, hence it is classified as unskilled. Most women are assigned to construction work but express the desire to learn skills so they may be qualified to do more.

A labourer’s work is physically tough, especially in Delhi’s extreme weather conditions and the women complain of exhaustion. Most of them work over time, beyond the stipulated hours of 8 am to 5 pm. In fact, at one site where the worker’s homes were located almost 5 km away, the company had a drop facility available only at 7 pm and not at the regular finishing time of 5 pm. Hence, if a worker does not want to walk home after a hard day’s work, they must continue working for an extra two hours. They lament that once they are in their 40s and do not wish to continue, they will have no supplementary skills to help contribute to the family’s income and in a large city like Delhi, they do not know where they can search for alternate employment or learn skills.

The only alternate option is to work in someone’s home, but not everyone is happy with the salaries paid and often do not feel safe working in other’s houses. Women’s manual work does not receive much respect even though they are indispensable to construction. They are used to being more respected in the village than at construction sites or in the city and they believe this problem stems from the fact that their work is not given any regard and they are financially dependent on their husbands or their fathers. There are few women who have completed some formal education and find their education wasted as they are compelled to do manual work at construction sites. Ahalya, a woman of 24 and mother of a year-old daughter had attended school till the 10th grade but could not clear matriculation. However, she can read and write in Hindi, knows some English and has basic mathematical skills. She expressed a strong desire to take up some other work in the city where she would receive her current wage of at least Rs 110 per day and could put her education to use.

Ahalya’s reasons for being distressed with her line of work go beyond the frustration with having to do unskilled manual labour. In the city, she has to live in a one room, tin-roof kuchcha shed with her husband and her daughter in what is referred to as a “labour camp”. These are located on-site or near construction sites and most workers and their families reside here in one-room temporary tin-shed huts. While the tin protects from the rain and the sun, the bare earth floors become muddy and dusty. Lack of ventilation means most of their time is spent outside the hut unless there is a downpour. Water stagnates as it cannot be pumped out or removed, as no municipal services are extended to these camps by the city or the employer. Stagnant water is the main cause for many water-borne infectious diseases that spread through these camps each year. Having no separate bathing spaces for men and women and no functioning toilets at the construction site and the camp is humiliating.

The city does not allow a break from routine work and compels many men and women to take up habits such as alcoholism, smoking and chewing tobacco. Missing one day’s work means giving up money that could buy household rations for a few days. Hence, one is forced to work all week long. If one does take a day off, it is spent settling the house or relaxing. There is no time for recreation. Ahalya believes the routine working style of the city and the insult of living in such poor conditions drives many to take on desperate measures. Women working for the last 10 years have never visited any recreational spaces in the metropolis. Their reasons are the same and they do not wish to push their husbands too far as they know they are always short of cash. Some even asked me if I would take them out one day. Because they have not seen the city or felt comfortable with what it offers them besides a daily wage, the women never refer to the city as their own. They always say “hamara desh gaon hai”. The city’s ways continue to shock them despite spending much time here and hence, it is a space that remains alien to them.

Physical Insecurity

Physical insecurity, is another reason why they are afraid of the city. They argue that if women behave decently, they face no danger from men. But if women behave “deviantly”, men lose respect for them. Lakshmi in Gurgaon says she has never heard of men bothering any woman who stuck to her path and her work. Sultana working in Dwarka also believes that it is up to women to not show any signs of being vulnerable and to call all unknown men dada or bhaiya. While Lakshmi and Sultana’s views match those of most other women, there have been stories at the construction sites of supervisors forcing women and young girls to have sexual intercourse with them or assigning less strenuous work to the women they find attractive in the hope of luring them.

An instructor at Mobile Créches says there are women who work at the site as labourers and also as prostitutes, as they are desperate to earn money for their families. Some of the women also supported the supervisor’s claim and explained that these women usually have troubled households with either addicts for husbands or their own addictions and many mouths to feed.

Sometimes sexual relations with a person who is not a spouse is not for monetary
reasons alone. For construction workers who are victims of sexual assault or have troubled families, there is no one to turn to for help in the city. Other workers who live in their camp or are from their district can only provide some comfort. The routine of work is a necessity, but the battles in their personal lives are not factored in when they come to the city. Unfortunately, even as the years pass on, the city provides no known mechanism for them to iron out their hardships without the prospect of a strained personal and family life.

What these women are vocal about and talk endlessly of are the blatant disparities in the city. Their “labour camps” get a few hours of water early in the morning and late at night, while the homes they help build have swimming pools, and have running water flowing from numerous taps. While they live in darkness and in scorching summer heat without any electricity, the “palaces” they help build have air-conditioners and lights running for 24 hours. While they must walk for kilometers in the heat to reach their place of work, every individual member of the houses they have built has her own car. At smaller construction sites, there is no water available at all and not even few hours of electricity.

Construction workers ask that if the rich can have access to enough water, electricity and transportation means that allow them to be wasteful, then why cannot the labourers, who work so hard to build their “palaces”, have at least basic, everyday access to the same amenities? The workers feel betrayed by the public institutions, the infrastructure of the city and by their employers for not providing them the civic amenities that many had been provided even in their villages.

To them, the lack of such provisions is humiliating as they have no choice but to live in congested camps with impersonal one-room sheds, unclean tanks of stagnant water for bathing, unusable or no toilets and no garbage or sewage clearance. They cannot complain to their employers and have to make the best of what they are given. There is no love for the urban space. They say, the city may have given them their daily bread, but it has not offered them comfort or dignity. It is how it is, and they have no choice but to accept it.

Cherished Children and Unfortunate Circumstances

Many mothers bring young teenagers to the city so that they may take care of their siblings while the parents are busy working. These children miss out on years of schooling and when they go back to the village, they have to start again from a lower grade. Parents tend to see girls as caregivers to younger siblings and feel their education can be compromised as against boys of the same age.

While crèche services are available at some of the larger construction sites, not all children attend them. On walking around the site, it is easy to spot the children who are watching their parents work or are playing with friends and are even sleeping adjacent to where a parent is working. A supervisor at the crèche at a Gurgaon site explained that more mothers are sending their children to the crèche, as they understand the importance of an education in order to secure better futures. They want their children to have well-paying jobs and not have to work as labourers. A decade ago this was not the case – most mothers were apprehensive about leaving their children at crèches and schools. They had been warned that the city is a dangerous place and feared that someone would pick up their child while they were working.

With more exposure through the media and with growing awareness campaigns on infant care, some mothers have begun insisting on taking up work only at sites where crèche and school facilities are available, the supervisor said. Smaller construction sites found in areas such as Dwarka tend to not have crèche facilities. Mothers working at these sites say that they can only dream of sending their children to school – not only is there no crèche facility provided by the contractor, there is also no public school nearby and the women are sceptical about allowing their children to walk alone to a school far away.

As a consequence of not being at school, many children begin doing small chores at construction sites and eventually become absorbed into the general labour force. I watched Bittu, a girl of seven standing by and observing her mother shovel rubble and load it onto another worker's head. Out of curiosity the little girl began doing the same when her mother's shovel sat idle. She felt this was a way to help out. It is difficult to estimate how many children or adolescents work at construction sites. The census estimates there were over 10 lakh persons between the age of 5 and 19 working in the construction sector across India in 2001. There is no available data yet to show whether this number has fallen or risen in the last 10 years. Also, this enumeration probably only includes children who are easily visible as workers at sites. There are many others who stay at home to help raise their younger siblings or look after the household – their labour goes unaccounted for. Young girls are often employed at households nearby as domestic help. Many between 15 and 19 years hesitate to reveal their correct ages and on many occasions, parents too hide their ages for fear of being removed from the construction site by a potentially strict contractor.

The future and the welfare of their children inspires the women I met to work as construction labourers. However, the conditions under which they are forced to live and work in the city compel them to make use of their child's labour. The children of cyclical migrants are disadvantaged since they are constantly uprooted from one place to another, missing out on school years and having to constantly adjust to new surroundings. The children who particularly bear the brunt of these forces are young girls.

Poor Health Service Delivery

Hospitals and healthcare services are difficult to access if one is a migrant labourer in the National Capital Region. The fear of hurting themselves or falling sick from exposure to dust and chemicals remains constant. Those who have been working in the industry for many decades say that some mechanisation has reduced the burden of their work. Trucks can easily move around larger
sites now and dump the cement and bricks closer to where they are required, as opposed to maintaining a common store area. So women have to walk shorter distances with heavy loads on their heads. The fear of getting hurt still remains and it is highest when they are new to this line of work. The companies offer medical help and compensation when there is a major accident on the site. But, if workers fall sick or suffer from minor injuries they have to consult physicians independently and incur expenses out of their daily wages. Hence, concerns about general health remain on the minds of workers since any major accident or illness in their household results in a loss of savings and further indebtedness. In addition, the facilities for consultation available to them in the city are negligible.

The BOCW 1996 orders that all construction sites must have first-aid facilities. However, none of the women working at the sites I visited had heard of any such facilities. Workers must be registered with welfare boards that are supposed to assist workers in case of medical emergencies, including accidents and illnesses, and compensated for expenses incurred. Pregnant women are supposed to receive maternity benefits. At both the Gurgaon and the Dwarka sites, none of the women had heard about the BO CW Act and nor did they know that they could get healthcare assistance upon registration with a welfare board.

Wearing any protective gear while working was conspicuous by its absence at the construction sites I visited. The women dressed in sarees with their ornaments and other symbols of marriage in place. Most women wore footwear, but many did not. Most of the younger children around the site walked barefoot too. If a member of the household shows symptoms of an illness, he or she is taken to the clinic of a “Bengali doctor”. In Gurgaon, where many large construction sites are clustered together, there is a stretch of road lined on both sides by these “Bengali doctors”. The men who set up these clinics claim that they are registered medical practitioners, but have no documentation to show such qualifications. They advise women and their families on all their medical concerns. While their credentials remain dubious, according to Vandana Prasad of the Public Health Resource Network, the practitioners act as medical counsellors to women and their children in a city where the availability of medical consultation is either absent or very rare for poor labourers. The “doctors” admit that they are not capable of handling any serious illnesses and ask the women to travel to government hospitals if more elaborate medical care is required. Most of these practitioners came to Delhi from West Bengal or Chhattisgarh some six-seven years ago when they heard that there was a growing demand in their trade amongst migrant labourers. While Gurgaon has a plethora of these clinics, in Dwarka even these rudimentary services are unavailable for many kilometers.

The “Bengali doctors” offer a vital service to labourers but their lack of detailed medical knowledge can also end up complicating the patient’s condition, instead of improving it. Prasad says that in Delhi, migrant workers face a dual burden regarding healthcare systems, as there is lack of dissemination of knowledge about preventive healthcare and access to healthcare infrastructure is poor. India has no urban health mission that combines infrastructure about their health, then they tend to feed their families well before eating what little is left. The “Bengali doctors” also complain that all the women working at construction sites tend to have severe nourishment deficiencies and many of their illnesses stem from these. The lack of sanitation and hygiene at construction sites and “labor camps” results in seasonal diseases such as malaria, typhoid, dengue, dysentery and chikungunya spreading easily amongst the workers each summer and monsoon season.

The Government of Delhi has implemented the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) programme, but only families below the poverty line can apply for these smart cards. With the poverty line set at a daily earning of Rs 21 per day, most construction workers cannot avail of this service. Also, in the case of construction workers, accessing these smart cards becomes problematic as they are not registered citizens of Delhi. If migrant workers are doubly burdened with regards to accessing knowledge and infrastructure about their health, then the women amongst them suffer the most. Managing pregnancies, childbirth and keeping their children healthy, along

**Poor Sanitation Hygiene**

At sites covered in Gurgaon and Dwarka there was no provision for safe drinking water. Sanitation and hygiene are poor and no usable toilets have been constructed. Hygiene products for women are not easily available or are too expensive and many women complain that there is no facility for their disposal. When women are menstruating, they feel embarrassed to ask for leave from male supervisors as no female overseers are found at sites. Many pregnant women continue to work at least six months into their pregnancy and they face no pressure from supervisors preventing them from doing so. The women do not wish to lose out on supplementary income, hence they continue to work till they can manage. Working and managing the household and children leaves them exhausted and undernourished as they tend to feed their families well before eating what little is left. The “Bengali doctors” also complain that all the women working at construction sites tend to have severe nourishment deficiencies and many of their illnesses stem from these. The lack of sanitation and hygiene at construction sites and “labor camps” results in seasonal diseases such as malaria, typhoid, dengue, dysentery and chikungunya spreading easily amongst the workers each summer and monsoon season.

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with working at construction sites, running the household and negotiating a life without any support systems in the city, becomes possible only at the cost of their own physical health.

Conclusions
The woman construction worker’s experience of working and living in the city of Delhi is fraught with difficulties. Lack of financial control, despite being an earning member of the family, lack of knowledge and information about rights and about the city leaves the women burdened and vulnerable. Yet, these women say they cannot complain about their situation. “Ab jaisa hai, us se hi kaam chalana padega. Hum gareeb log hain, aur koi raasta nahi hai”. These words are commonly heard from them, despite their continued hardships and the loss of the dream of a settled and comfortable family life.

There are a few women who have made the transition from being a dependent construction worker to someone more independent and empowered. I met two during the course of my fieldwork. Rabiya, a construction worker at one time now runs a general store at a “labour camp” and is also employed by the construction company as a guard. Rabiya had liberated herself from the burden of dependency on employers, male members of the family and thekedars. But when a fire broke out in her shop and there was no one to help her recover her losses, she blamed the city for not taking care of her after so many years of service. She cannot go back to the village either as she had been away for too long or will find her hamlet suffocating.

If there is an opportunity to learn some skills or take up jobs that are less hazardous and strenuous, women are willing to move out of the construction industry. Their relation to work is of desperation, and they are resigned to doing labouring work. While they were prepared for hard work when they came to the city, they were not ready to face a new system of humiliation and dependence. Unlike the village, where they had to work as per the wishes of their in-laws and extended family, here they are burdened with balancing an 11-hour work day, managing their homes and bringing up their children, along with other possible concerns of health, addiction, abuse and mistreatment. They have to compromise their own nutrition, recreation, rest and even the possibility of giving their children a future different from their own present condition. The city, its people and its institutions, they say, do not help them progress, but keep them where they are, maintaining their invisibility. The law makes lofty ideals for the industry and city to implement, but fails miserably as its word only remains an ideal and is yet to be seen working on the ground. And it is impossible to know how many such migrant women live within the capital city, as there is no reliable estimate of their numbers. Because they are migrants who remain hidden, they are ignored and they do not feel that they belong here. They provide a crucial service as they build the city but do not understand how it can ever be magnificent if it does not grant them basic facilities and services. The city is able to maintain its status quo, as long as it denies them a voice and legal rights. The new systems of time, space, work and dependence become signifiers of oppression and humiliation for the women. The same informal, underground culture remains at every site across the city and the thrice-dependent (on contractor, thekedar and male relatives) women become liminal citizens.

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NOTES

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