

## Socio-Economic Background of Construction Workers: A Study on Dhaka City

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### Abstract

*Construction workers render a significant contribution to the growth of an economy, especially with respect to the development of a city. But socio-economic background of construction workers in Bangladesh has become worse in the absence of any formal institutions, protection laws, development plans, training centers and other types of considerable supports. As a result, the construction sector is totally in control of the traditional middlemen or sardar in most of the cases. In our society, people in the upper level always dominate the labor class. No effective national policy in favor of them is found and a limited implementation of Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC), drafted in 1993, does not support them in this regard. The Labour Act-2006 seems to be crude and far away from the expectation of the construction workers. Real Estate & Housing Association of Bangladesh (REHAB) hardly plays any role or develops any plan and policy for the betterment of the workers. This study focuses on the present socio-economic scenario of construction workers who are working without any formal training, and are being employed by third party. They have become the victim of frequent casualty and some other severe difficulties. Moreover, this study tries to recognize the rights of workers and recommends some rules and regulations so a laborer can carry out their tasks in safe and humane conditions.*

**Keywords:** *Urbanization, economic growth, labor intensive, employment generation, safety awareness, compensation packages, training and development.*

### Introduction:

The extent of human accomplishment depends on the volume of human activities. Growth activities are shared by millions of people ranging from cabinet members, industrialists or businessmen to a group of conventional workers or laborers. They may be called as "Growth Actors". Growth actors are the group of people who are responsible for promoting sustainable growth of an economy. These include the people who are engaged in private enterprises, semi and full Government ventures etc. Without their efforts it would have been impossible to achieve what the world has achieved over the last centuries.

Construction industry, an emerging employment generating industry, performs a noteworthy job to a great extent in a developing economy like Bangladesh. This sector builds important backward and forward linkage to other sectors of the economy. But there is little appreciation

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of the amazing role that the construction industry plays. The position of the construction sector in relation to other sectors in the GDP and the incremental increase in the share of GDP show that the composition was 7.6% in 2010-2011 while the target was 4.76% (Table:1)

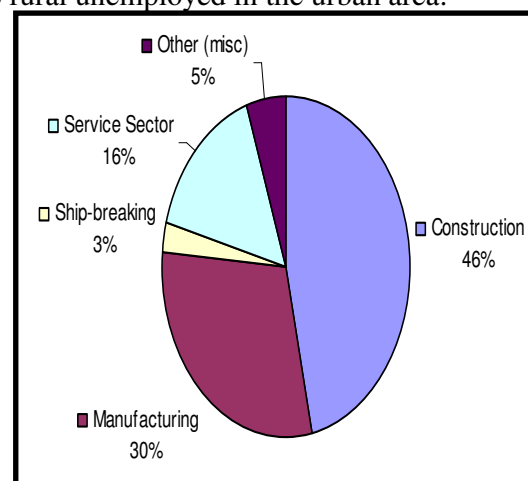
A construction worker is a tradesman, laborer, or professional employed in the physical construction site of a built environment and its infrastructure. A tradesman or tradesperson is a skilled manual worker in a particular trade or craft not in the liberal arts, "learned professions" or agriculture. Economically and socially, a tradesman's status is considered between a laborer and a professional, with a high degree of both practical and theoretical knowledge of his or her trade. In cultures where professional careers are highly prized, there can be a shortage of skilled manual workers. The physical construction worker does not actually exist in Bangladesh; all construction workers associate themselves with some subcategory of worker.

But construction workers, the main contributors to this emerging sector of a developing economy, are extremely ignored due to insufficiencies of stimulatory and supportive wages, safety and security, care and food that hinder the natural growth of the said sector. Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) reveals in Workplace Safety Report - 2011 with regard to accidents and violence at work place that 107 workers were killed, and 195 injured in construction sector. The rate is alarming and proves absence of any guideline to be followed or maintained by the employers. It also indicates to the absence of any protective law.

It is notable that the contribution of construction worker is very close to industry and higher than the other infrastructure services. In the urban area, next to transportation, the construction industry is the biggest employment sector. In this sense, it is very important that the construction industry is considered as an important parameter in urban sector review. There is very little research or study on the issues relating to the workers absorbed by this industry. However the following types of employment are found in the sector;

- ▶ Construction is very labor intensive sector that provides jobs for a large number of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled laborers.
- ▶ Construction work is a stepping stone for the rural unemployed in the urban area.

In 2010, Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) reveals that the highest number of death tolls (135) was recorded in construction sector while sea fishing took the second position (67). Readymade garment (RMG) sector came in third with 52 fatalities excepting the recent disasters in Tajrin Fashion (November, 2012) and Rana Palaza (April, 2013).



**Objectives:**

Broad objective of the study is to investigate socio-economic background of constructions workers in Dhaka city only. Moreover, the specific objectives of my study are as follows:

- To find out the role of construction workers to the economic growth of Bangladesh.
- To generate employment opportunities in a secured and humanistic environment.
- To know the working conditions of constructions workers in Dhaka city.
- To identify the welfare status of the workers.
- To investigate the management concerns in this regard.
- To determine the level of standards of living of the workers in their society, etc.

**Methodology:**

In this study, data have been collected from secondary sources like websites, books, Bangladesh Economic Review, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), REHAB's manual, RAJUK, relevant articles, etc. The paper has been prepared by collecting data from primary sources as under;

- ▶ Interviewing construction workers at construction sites (sample size 150, selected randomly)
- ▶ Interviewing concerned personnel at 12 construction companies (sample size 36, selected randomly, 3 from each)
- ▶ Collecting expert's opinions from REHAB members.

A questionnaire has been prepared based on – working conditions, welfare status, risk knowledge, management concerns, life style, etc.

**The Research Problem:**

On Monday, August 26, 2013, two construction workers had fallen to their death from a rooftop of a 12-storied building (under construction) at Tikatuli, Dhaka. Later again on Tuesday, August 27, 2013, two more construction workers died falling from another 11 storied building at Wari, old Dhaka. These are not isolated incidents. This is the fact; this is the reality in the sector in our country. Especially, death toll in Dhaka city distresses the policy-maker severely over the last few years.

**David Bergman** states in *“Bangladesh's Construction Boom Resulting in High Number of Workers' Deaths”*, Asia Calling on October, 2010.

The industry now employs over three million people and this is a source of big worth for the developers. But it comes at a high cost of the workers. In the last 15 years, developers have been buying up any available plot of land to build high rise buildings. Workers live on the construction sites in an inhuman condition. Workers make concrete. None of them is wearing boots, helmets or using any safety nets. It is seen by David that workers are working at the very edge of high-rise building. There is no barrier around the edge, no safety net is available, and the workers have no safety harnesses. David Bergman reports that safety laws are not being enforced here.

Moreover, David says that developers should continuously provide messages to the members to upgrade their sites. If workers put on a safety belt, there is hardly any chance to get any accidents. They must take on-the-job training to use helmets on a construction site. They must put on gum boots and know how to use safety nets. David reports that a worker starts his work in a barefooted manner, or just put on a simple tee-shirt. They are not familiar with keeping helmets on their head or not to use safety belt or safety nets. He added that authority has tried to push them to use these kind of safety tools and aware themselves of the danger of not to use those tools. But workers remained reluctant to use these tools.

Research Initiative for Social Equity Society (RISE Society), *The Life of a Construction Worker*, Posted on December 19, 2012; reveals that construction worker issues are very common in our society. People in upper class always dominate the labor class. International laws recognize the rights of workers and the necessity of supportive rules and regulations so that laborers can carry out their tasks in safe and humane conditions. The majority of laborers in Bangladesh do not know their rights. Many of the poor in villages migrate to Dhaka city to work as construction laborers. The migrants often become daily paid workers who go in search of work every morning. They earn a meager Tk. 300-350 after working hard from dawn to dusk for their employer. Yet, this is barely enough to feed his/her family.

Employers however may sack daily paid workers without any qualms and the laborer has to search another job to feed his/her family. A construction worker earns his/her livelihood by the sweat of his/her brow and often works without a break in good and bad weather; though human labor is essential for the construction industry.

In Bangladesh, the lives of construction workers are full of sorrow and suffering. One of the greatest tragedies for this type of workers is that there is an unfair treatment of their women counterparts. In this industry, women are good in number, and they are often paid unfairly by their employers. Reports of sexual exploitation are not very uncommon here. It is to be noted that human rights policies are to be implemented correctly so that they can lead a decent life with dignity.

*Impact of Migration on Poverty: Construction Workers in Bangladesh*, Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) focuses on vulnerability and workplace accidents of construction workers in Dhaka city. RMMRU states that about 80 per cent construction workers in the capital city work in a risky environment and without any safety measures. RMMRU has also mentioned that they are very much vulnerable to workplace that results accidents randomly. It is identified that absence of safety equipments or training, exposure to harmful chemicals, hazardous conditions, noisy working environments, dust, lack of proper accommodation and toilet facilities, etc. are the main causes for workplace accidents. RMMRU reveals a set of findings on construction workers in Bangladesh at BRAC Centre Inn in the capital on January 21, 2013 with the consultation of all stakeholders. In the study, the speakers said that 58 workers died falling from height alone in 2012. The study mentioned that 95 percent workers had no knowledge about the National Labour Act, and 94 percent workers mentioned that they were not aware of any collective bargaining, while 73 percent favored forming a trade union. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2.98 million people across the country now work in the construction sector.

RMMRU carried out the study between November and December in 2012. Nine spots including Badda, Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Nikunja etc were covered in the study. While interviewing 150 workers, it was found that 80 percent workers did not see any safety sign at their workplace. Most of the construction workers suffer from various health problems including fever, allergy, back-pain, cough, depression and eye strain as they live in unhygienic conditions.

According to the study, 80 percent workers stated that when they became ill, they secured medicine from pharmacies without any consultation of a physician. The research, coordinated by the University of Sussex, UK, was conducted by RMMRU.

In 2008, a Human Rights Watch reported the working conditions treacherous and inequitable and recommended the government of Bangladesh to enforce standard labor laws in favor of the construction industry. The International Labor Organization (ILO), in its report of 2006, estimated that 69% of 2.4 million construction workers in Bangladesh were migrants. Unexpected natural disasters and continuous mishaps in agriculture pushed them to switch to construction industry from their traditional profession.

### **Analysis and Findings of the Study:**

A Variety of workers are found to work at construction sites. Out of 150 workers, only 30 females were found in working at construction site. They are grouped into three major categories -- laborer, mason and electrical helper. 58 workers have been working in this sector for more than 10 years, 57 for more than 5 years, and rest 35 were engaged in this field for less than 5 years (2-3 years). In general, a worker gets Tk.10, 500 per month where as a mason gets Tk.15, 500 per month and an electrical helper receives Tk. 12,300 as a form of monthly package. It is also added that 118 workers (out of 150) stay and cook at construction site through a mess system, and the rest 22 stay at their residents.

### **Working Condition:**

In most cases, they collect their jobs from relatives who have joined in the field earlier and some time by the sub-contractor or middleman. Duty hours vary from site to site. Usually, it starts at 9 am and continues up to 6 pm. Some workers are to work till night even it is 12.00 am or more. Some work by rotation. In my study, it is found that 65 percent workers work on contractual basis, and remaining 35 percent work as salaried workers. It is to be noted that contract of a particular task has been made by a sub-contractor and the workers work and receive payment from that middleman or sub-contractor. This process results in no communication gap with the real owner of the site.

### **Risk Knowledge:**

Most of the workers, about 80 percent, feel that their work is less risky if total safety measurements are taken by the authority. Only 20 percent workers feel that the job is really a risky one. When an accident takes place, fellow workers response immediately to help the

victims. Actually, they response according to the severity of the accident. Workers know nothing due to lack of any formal knowledge relating to risk. The study represents that the risk factors are known from fellow workers and usually it comes from experience. No institutional knowledge is provided to the construction workers by the company or any agency.

**Welfare:**

About 87 percent workers join in this sector as unskilled laborer (helper) and continue years after years without any exception. They have hardly any knowledge about their welfare. The study reveals that their contribution is nearly neglected and this negligence is being done by government. Government officials are reluctant to enforce any standard laws. Workers are not concerned with their rights, recreations, health, leave, increments, promotions, and some other issues.

**Management Concerns regarding the Construction Workers:**

The concerned official at real estate companies and at REHAB provided that the issues of construction workers are contractual procurement under specific project which is mostly taken care by the project management. Usually they don't have anything to do except recruiting of site engineers, project coordinator, project supervisor, etc. Almost all real-estate companies' human resources department (HRD) is confined to regular employees' matters. It's the site engineers or project coordinator's job at the site, and it rarely comes at HRD. In fact, HRD hardly plays any role in recruitment process and in some other issues about the workers.

It's a matter of concern felt by all to take care of the construction worker by recruiting skilled and trained people as well as maintain safety at work place. The plan should come from the higher authority and human resources department (HRD) of a real estate company can introduce a set of principles for employment of construction workers. The real move is to be done at this moment that awareness and dissemination of information should be done by all to the construction workers at site. Implementation of Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) is required and REHAB should come forward with a set of instructions for the real estate companies to abide by ensuring better management of the workers.

**Recommendations:**

It has been noted that the construction workers are contracted by third part contractors for the construction company. They exploit the workers. They do business at the expense of the workers. In fact, they are deprived of the privileges of having any communication with the employer beyond the contractor or middle-man. Usually, employers get the upper hand in bargaining session. In this situation, one thing needs to be mentioned that Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) which was drafted in 1993 by House Building Research Institute has not been implemented. This should be implemented in reality without any delay.

The government, construction companies, and all other concerns should come forward with positive intention in order to develop a rigorous and integrated approach. Executives in the real estate companies have felt the need of improved policies for construction workers as an important issue because its lack has the potential to hamper reputation of the company. But existing HR policies are related only with regular employees – white collar worker. However, concerned personnel and the representative of REHAB (Real Estate & Housing Association of Bangladesh) feel that workers need training that can surely improve their quality and quantity of work, and they can be regarded as potential human resources. REHAB has started its functions in 1991 with 11 members; now it has 1081 members.

In fine, the prime recommendation will be to take necessary steps in institutionalizing the process of recruitment of construction workers. The process will help in providing skilled and quality manpower and open a new frontier of foreign remittance since we have a huge opportunity to export skilled manpower abroad. Some other significant recommendations are as follows:

- Adequate safety measures such as modern equipments at workplaces should be provided.
- Proper training program should be offered to the workers to make sure productivity in a secured work environment.
- Proper warning should be provided before starting a risky work in order to minimize accidents especially in electrocution work and in a high rise-building.
- Workers should put on safety belts when they work in a high rise building.
- Workers should know how to use helmets on construction sites, how to put on gum boots, and how to use of safety nets etc.
- Rules regarding safety and security need to be strictly imposed and violations should be punished in an exemplary manner.
- The government should inspect the construction sites for compliance of rules and rules violations are to be reported to them so that they can take necessary steps properly.
- Media should report workplace accidents and make the higher authorities of real estate companies and workers aware in this regard.
- Company should provide the accommodation for the workers.
- Company should provide food supplementary during the working hours so that they remain highly motivated to do work hard.
- Workers must be offered some sorts of recreations.
- Workers should be offered medical allowances, festival bonuses, and some other allowances by the company to augment their motivation.
- RAJUK (Rajdhani Unnayan Kartipakkah), the government body, should undertake measures to ensure safety and security of the workers.
- REHAB should monitor the overall activities of members, and any violations by any member should be given exemplary punishment.
- Moreover, REHAB should instruct all members to offer a well-structured monthly remuneration instead of daily or irregular pay-system.

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**Conclusion:**

This study focuses only on a number of dimensions of socio-economic background of construction workers in Dhaka city. Further study may be conducted to represent the present scenario of construction workers all over Bangladesh. Most of the people of our country are ready to do any type of risky job without any thinking, since they have to maintain their family and meet some other necessities. In Bangladesh, labor market is completely an employer dominated market. Workers of any sector are in an awful position. Especially, traditional subcontractors play a key role in hiring the construction workers. Subcontractors hardly have any knowledge about the risk involved in the work, and they do not warn the workers. When the subcontractors come to hire them in the labor market, which usually sits on an open street, the workers have no scope of bargaining, and they are ready to accomplish the work even though it is risky for their lives. Most of the real estate companies in Bangladesh have no human resources (HR) department, and the administration department acts as HR (Administrative HR) even though they are not experts in HR as well as in management of construction workers. A very few real estate companies have the HR department only for the white-collar workers not for the blue-collar workers leading to a great discrimination with the blue-collar workers. Now every real estate company realizes the need of a very strong HR department for the construction workers - the blue-collar workers. If every real estate company establishes supportive HR policies and adopts such policies for them, it will be more effective and ensure the safety and security of the blue-collar workers who are really contributing of construction field.

Finally, effective policy mechanism is very required for the construction workers to ensure the progress of urbanization; otherwise, the construction workers will never feel safe at workplace. Moreover, the awareness is really needed for those who are the contributors of the urban growth and doing their hardships. Their efforts should be recognized appropriately otherwise the real growth of our economy is likely to be hampered.



## Appendix

### Contribution of Construction Sector in GDP

**Table 1: GDP and Sectoral Growth Rates (2005-2010)** (At  
Constant Factor Cost of 2005 - 2011)

(Taka in Million)

SL No	Sector	2004- 05	2005- 06	2006- 07	2007- 08	2008- 09	2009- 10	2010- 11	Annual Compound Growth Rate (%)	
									Target	Achieve ment
1	Agruculture & Forestry	442298 .33	465449 .41	489812 .24	515450 .29	542430 .30	570822 .51	60070 0.84	4.05	1.72
2	Fishing	128069 .75	133082 .80	138299 .65	143720 .99	149354 .85	155209 .57	16129 3.78	4.90	3.02
3	Mining & Quarrying (Natural Gas , Crude Petroleum, & others)	29090. 27	31783. 35	34726. 49	37942. 16	41455. 61	45294. 39	49488. 66	5.60	4.92
4	Industry	422690 .22	468196 .69	518621 .47	574477 .01	636348 .18	704882 .88	78079 8.76	10.10	4.02
5	Electricity, Gas & Water Supply	41915. 36	45129. 21	48604. 16	52346. 68	56377. 37	60718. 43	65393. 75	6.90	11.39
6	<b>Construction</b>	<b>231195 .50</b>	<b>250417 .79</b>	<b>271202 .47</b>	<b>293712 .27</b>	<b>318090 .39</b>	<b>344491 .89</b>	<b>37308 4.72</b>	<b>4.76</b>	<b>7.60</b>
7	Wholesale & Retail Trade	361552 .66	385961 .11	412206 .47	440236 .51	470172 .59	502144 .32	53629 0.14	6.40	4.91
8	Hotel & Restaurant	17508. 97	18813. 93	20224. 97	21741. 85	23372. 49	25125. 42	27009. 83	4.60	6.30
9	Transport, Storage & Communication	255522 .65	275922 .18	297995 .95	321835 .63	347582 .48	375389 .08	40542 0.21	6.90	5.92
10	Financial Intermediation	43379. 78	47068. 78	51069. 63	55410. 54	60120. 44	65230. 68	70775. 29	5.72	4.88
	<b>GOP</b>	<b>197322 3.49</b>	<b>212182 5.25</b>	<b>228276 3.50</b>	<b>245687 3.93</b>	<b>264530 4.70</b>	<b>284930 9.17</b>	<b>30702 55.97</b>	<b>6.14</b>	<b>5.25</b>

**Source :** Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh, 2010 (31th Edition)

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