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Life Experiences of Construction Sector Workers in the COVID Context in Lalitpur, Nepal

Devendra Adhikari,

Independent Researcher

Email for Correspondence: devendra.adhi84@gmail.com

Abstract

The COVID-pandemic has hit hard on Nepali's economy and the lives of construction- sector workers. The purpose of this research is to explore the life experiences of construction - sector workers during and post COVID-pandemic. This research adopts a qualitative approach under the socio-constructionism paradigm. Data gathered from in-depth interviews with three participants in the sectors of masonry, house-painting, and plumbing have been used for making out the meaning of the research. The findings of this research reveal that the COVID-pandemic has brought new resilient strategies in the lives of the construction workers such as keeping high concern on personal safety and family's well-being, exploring employment opportunities through informal networks. Living with the COVID has become possible due to the resiliency and social capital of the workers. This research is helpful to TVET practitioners and academicians to understand the survival strategies of the construction sector workers and plan TVET programs accordingly.

Keywords: Construction Workers, COVID Pandemic, Resilience, Social Capital

COVID-pandemic and Nepali Workers

Nepalese people have been hit hard by the COVID pandemic. The imposing of lockdown in several countries, banning of international flights, and social distancing among individuals have directly affected Nepal's remittance sector, tourism sector, and other production industries. In the meantime, the informal sector workers such as the workers from the construction sector also suffered due to the pandemic. Cities administration in Nepal even issued directives that the development projects should keep the workers residentially and adopt necessary health protocols to continue the work (Lalitpur District Administration

Office, 2021). This chaotic situation in Nepal's economy is largely affecting the livelihood of the Nepali youths working in the construction sector in Lalitpur, Nepal.

In Nepal, youths enter the construction sector work, basically in two ways. First, government and other agencies provide skill training to the youths to make them employable in the job market. 21,000 youths received short term skill training and 14,500 had their skill tested in the last fiscal year 2077/78¹ (Nepal Ministry of Finance, 2021). Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training

¹2020-2021

(CTEVT) has endorsed curricula for such training which have to be compulsorily applied in the field. Learners must participate in the training programs for the said period. Based on the learnings from the curricula and other market-oriented skills from competent trainers, these skilled graduates can appear in the skill-testing examination conducted by National Skill Testing Board. Skill-testing is believed to be a gateway to explore more employment opportunities (Pandit & Pasa, 2020). The skill-trained youths are also considered as the capable human capital in societies (Pasa, 2017). Second, is the informal way, where thousands of youths learn the skill through their masters at the real workplace. Mostly seen in the construction sector, a helper is transformed into a skilled worker after learning skills from seniors for several years which is common skill developments of Nepalese youths, which is also termed as an informal apprenticeship (Alla-Mensah & McGrath, 2021). Overall, because most construction workers are in the informal sector, their livelihoods are likely to be miserable due to the COVID pandemic. COVID pandemic has brought several social, economic, health-related, and other dimensional changes in the lives of the construction sector workers. The voices of construction sector workers are missing in the academic discourse. Thus, the purpose of my research is to explore the experiences of construction sector workers during and post-COVID contexts. Their life experiences would have meaningful implications to reshape the TVET programs accordingly.

Theoretical Insights

Resilience: Living with the COVID

The Himalayan nation, Nepal, is one of the least developed countries in the world (Nepal National Planning Commission, 2020; United Nations, 2021). It has a high multidimensional poverty index [17.4% as of 2019] (Nepal National Planning Commission, 2021) and middle human development status [rank 142 out of 189 countries] (United Nation Development Programme, 2020). Thereby, being resilient to take up the COVID pandemic situation easily, is the compulsion of most of the Nepalese

because their dominant priorities are the basic human necessities such as wellbeing, employment, and food. Resilience explains how people cope up with their different adversities and how they resume their normal lives (Ungar, 2018). Amid the labeling of poor, and highly prone to COVID pandemic, Nepali people still live a happy life in the COVID situation as Nepal attains the highest position amongst seven south Asian countries (excluding Bhutan) in the World Happiness Report 2021 (Helliwell et al., 2021). Thereby, the collective resilience of communities in Nepal during the unprecedented times (Sousa et al., 2013) helped to normalize the pandemic situation quickly. The people's hardships due to the social, economic, and geographic vulnerabilities have made people live resiliently in Nepal (Posch et al., 2019). Thereby, living with the COVID has become a part of life for people working in the construction sectors in Nepal.

Social Capital

Social capital is an asset earned by an individual in society due to their role, status, and interactions with others (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009; Claridge, 2018). Social capital underneath three components, "social network, social trusts, and social resources" (Rostila, 2011, p. 14). One can convert the social capital developed through human connections into resources that would benefit all (Bourdieu, 1998, as cited in Pasa, 2018). In line with the above definitions, the development of relationships amongst the construction sector workers is likely to help them in exploring jobs in the markets.

Methodology

I have applied a social constructionism worldview in my research. Social constructionism is a theory that asserts that human learnings are linked to interactions with other members of the community, and the reality to understand the world is co-created or socially created (Galbin, 2014). I have opted qualitative approach by interpreting the interview data of my participants. In this study, I have interacted with three construction sector workers in Lalitpur Metropolitan City, Nepal, to learn about their personal

and work experiences in the COVID context. The interviews were done in July and August 2021, when Nepal was reeling under the second wave² of the COVID. Initially, I developed some interview guidelines themes to gather the information which I developed further as I started interacting and probing the life stories of the participants (Dixit & Banerjee, 2021). The selection of the participants was judgmental and based upon their work experiences in masonry, painting, and plumbing sectors. Namely, they are Mr. Dakarmi (in the Masonry sector), Mr. Painter (Building painting sector), and Mr. Plumber (Plumbing sector). All three participants are male, as it is uncommon to find skilled female construction workers in Nepali society. I have taken verbal consent with the participants for the interview and kept their names anonymous in this article.

Findings

I have thematized the field information in two different themes; *COVID experiences, and Working opportunities and challenges*. These themes reveal the construction workers' living experiences during the COVID period, which add to the research's meaning-making.

COVID Experiences of Workers

During the COVID lockdown in Nepal, construction workers, who are largely from the informal sector, undoubtedly suffered serious difficulties. I witnessed them facing difficulties in finding works, getting timely payment, keeping health safety measures, and looking after the wellbeing of the family. The first wave (March to July 2020, with some localized lockdowns until September), and the second wave (April to August 2021) are the two COVID periods in Nepal. A participant shared his COVID experiences as:

During the first wave, only those people who knew me previously offered work. Unknown people did not make any contact. There was no public transportation service so I couldn't travel far to work. The scenario was quite normal during the second wave period. Public vehicles,

motorbikes, and private vehicles operated normally, banks and cooperatives were not closed, and the construction activities also operated smoothly.

(Mr. Dakarmi, Masonry sector)

After the first wave of COVID, its health-related panics remained strong until September 2020. During this period, Mr. Dakarmi's work was fully abrupted for 3 months, April to June. After June, although the lockdown was not lifted, life gradually started becoming normal. In the second wave period, the lockdown was declared in April 2021, but people seemed less afraid. Everyone appeared to be working normally. Mr. Dakarmi keeps on listening to COVID-related news regarding the lockdowns, keeping safety measures, vaccines, and others to be updated. While traveling from one place to another, he puts on a face mask. After returning home from work, he washes his hands and feet with soap and water. He described:

During the first wave, everyone was very frightened. A large number of people also died during that time. But now, people seemed to be less fearful. The government has asked us not to go outside the house. But it is not possible for us as we have to feed our family.

(Mr. Dakarmi, Masonry sector)

Another participant, Mr. Painter told me that during the first wave there were fewer job opportunities. Because the constructions of houses had stopped. He got some work through his contacts, but he remained jobless for nearly eight months out of the total sixteen months of COVID period from March 2020 to July 2021. Due to the unavailability of public transportation services, he could not travel far to work. So, he bought a bicycle. The situation was different in this second wave. He shared, "The lockdown in the second wave seems less strict. There was also news about getting the vaccine and being safe. I am also waiting for it."

The third participant, Mr. Plumber's work has not

²The first wave COVID period was from March to September 2020, and the second wave was from April to August 2021.

been abruptly due to the COVID. He revealed that:

During the first lockdown, my work hardly stopped for a week. The second lockdown didn't hamper my work even for a single day. Whenever we hear about the lockdown, we would ask the dealers to bring the necessary plumbing-related materials earlier. Sometimes, during the lockdown phase the dealers would also deliver the materials at night. After all the materials were ready, we would go to the site and continue our work. (Mr. Plumber, Plumbing sector)

The views of participants suggest that people do acknowledge the COVID-related prohibitions; however, poverty pushes them to continue their works. They apply some measures at the workplace and are hopeful to get COVID protection vaccines. At the same time, the essence of the word 'contact', in finding jobs has become quite important in Nepali's construction sector. The support or network among the workers and their relationship with each other has helped them to find jobs even during the pandemic, which is quite praiseworthy.

Changes Occurred in Workplaces after COVID

As construction workers, my research participants have experienced some changes at their workplaces and in their working approaches after the COVID outbreak. Mr. Dakarmi told me:

At workplaces also, we have to put on our face mask. We regularly wash our hands and legs, which has become common now. Besides, we have the same team of workers for a long time. If any new people come to join us or talk to us, we maintain our distance. (Mr. Dakarmi, Masonry sector)

For safety measures, his team cooks food at the working sites. He said, "We buy ration (food) and cook ourselves in rotation. Due to this, we can start work from early morning until late evening. This makes us safe and efficient." He further elaborated that during the first wave period, it was hard to get money in time, but the situation is far better during the second wave period.

Mr. Painter also had similar experiences. He explained, "In painting occupation, washing hands regularly is common. However, after COVID, we have started to use sanitizer and face masks. As we have a close team to work with, we do not interact with strangers." Nowadays, he has also stopped going out to hotels/restaurants to have lunch, instead, he takes food from home to the work sites. Mr. Plumber has a different experience of changes in his professional work due to COVID. He pointed out:

Due to COVID, the price of plumbing items has increased by 20-25%. Even the market expenses have largely increased. But the amount paid to the plumbers have not increased so far and further shared that, there is high profit in selling plumbing-related materials. I along with other 6-7 plumbers have planned to open such a shop. But due to COVID, we have postponed this plan. (Mr. Plumber, Plumbing sector)

These discussions with participants reveal that personal safety, as well as professional security, has become a top priority for workers.

Personal Awareness and Safety

Keeping oneself aware and updated with the prevailing scenario is very important in today's COVID context. Mr. Dakarmi regularly listens to the news and gets updated with the COVID situations such as when will the lockdown start, when will it be lifted, what activities are prohibited, what is the news of vaccination, and others. He shared that, "I listen to the news as if I have information, I can travel to different places, meet friends, go for work, and keep my family informed. In villages, many people have got the vaccine. However, here [in the city], our turn has not come." He is aware of the lockdown schedules, an increase in virus infection rates, and vaccination services. He's also concerned that people are no longer using hand sanitizer, which was something that was done purposefully a year ago. He further elaborated, "We do not use hand sanitizer at workplaces now. However, I take

precautionary measures before entering the house from work. Nothing is more important than family. If anyone in the family gets infected, it will be very difficult for us.” Mr. Dakarmi is worried about his family and he regularly advise them in wear facemasks and use sanitizer when travelling to stores or other public locations.

In Mr. Painter’s case, due to less work availability and delay in receiving payment from employers, he has difficulty managing food for the family and paying room rent. He also keeps himself informed by listening to the news to discover when the lockdown will begin and when they will finish. However he is still satisfied in several ways, such as not becoming infected by COVID and taking good care of his family’s well-being. He expressed, “Thank god! my children and wife did not have to go through any psychological trauma as we were all together in our rented room in Kathmandu during the pandemic. If I were abroad, both me and family would have faced this psychological problem.” At the same time, he sadly shared that “I have not observed any (good) changes. Work opportunities have largely reduced and my earning is very little now.”

Mr. Plumber seemed to be less worried about his earning in the plumbing sector. He shared:

Many of my friends have become jobless due to the COVID. Even managing food has been tough for them. They had to borrow money from others. Some of them even moved back to their villages, leaving everything behind as they could not afford the room rents. I am also worried about my children’s future. They have not gone to school for a long time. They take online classes from home, but it is not effective. They just engage themselves in playing mobile games. Besides this, I am satisfied with my work as I continuously got jobs even during the COVID period.
(Mr. Plumber, Plumbing sector)

These participants narratives show that, in addition to maintaining personal and family safety and well-

being, meeting basic requirements is a top priority in the workers’ life.

Coping up with COVID

Participants have shared mixed views regarding how they dealt with the COVID pandemic. Mr. Dakarmi shared his experiences of being infected with COVID. He revealed:

When I went to the hospital for my mother’s treatment, I was also tested for COVID. The result was positive. I was surprised since I had no symptoms. I had heard from the news that a COVID patient will show sign of fever, cold, sore throat, and tiredness, but I was fit and fine. Afterward, I returned to my working site and continued to work. However, I did not share this information with my friends. If I had told them, they would have been frightened. I did not come in physical contact with my family for a long time.

(Mr. Dakarmi, Masonry sector)

Borrowing his words, now a days many people do not take the pandemic seriously. “Radio continues saying the COVID news, infection rates, and deaths, but I cannot leave my work. Now corona has become a normal thing for us” he shared. His views were signaling his responsibility to look after his family’s needs in Kathmandu.

Opposingly, a kind of pessimism has been developed in the life of Mr. Painter. He does not see a good future in Nepal. He revealed that “I have decided to go to Saudi-Arab and work there. The condition here is much pitiful. With these low earning, fewer work opportunities, and (political) condition of Nepal, our life is going to be miserable for sure.” His views indicate that COVID and other social-political situations are pushing him to choose foreign employment. This could also be due to high competition in his work area as there are unchecked flow of workers (from every sector) in the plumbing sector as told by him.

Thereby, these viewpoints of the participants show

that the construction sector workers are struggling hard to cope with COVID. Some of the workers are managing well but some of them are facing their toughest times.

Exploring Work Opportunities and Professional Security

Effective communication skills have a significant role in finding jobs in the market. Besides this, several helpful factors are also present depending upon the context, profession, and an individual's professionalism. Regarding this, Mr. Dakarmi shared

Last year, when I was working at a site in Thamel, many people came to inspect the work. They were employers, contractors, engineers, and representatives from the construction companies. They saw my work performance, dedication, and sincerity. They even took my phone number and nowadays, they call me when there is work available. At the moment, I am able to take building contracts and mobilize my own human resources. There is plenty of work in this field, but you'll need your network.

(Mr. Dakarmi, Masonry sector)

Besides this, Mr. Dakarmi is also concerned about the availability of work in the market. He believes that "If I become jobless, I should not sit quietly at home. No one will come to give me work". Thus, external factors such as good skill demonstration and networking and internal factors such as integrity and proactiveness are important for a worker to sustain themselves during such unprecedented times such as the COVID pandemic.

For Mr. Painter, people also call him for work through contacts. While coloring one house, other people observe his work and call him if they like it. Sometimes, he gets offered by companies as well. He expressed that "The work of a painter comes only after the masons, electricians, plumbers, carpenters have finished their works. I have a personally known some of these people. These people recommend my name to house owners." He further elaborated:

If there was no lockdown, I would get abundant opportunities to work in this sector; but we need contact and links for that. Instead, if we do well at one site, other people will also notice it and contact us for work.

(Mr. Painter, Painting sector)

Mr. Painter also has a team of painters. In the team, a leader deals with an employer and passes the message to the colleagues. The group has kept some helpers to do the physical works like carry color containers, fix bamboo ladders, and clean the workplace. This group is beneficial when looking for work in the market. Mr. Painter revealed that if they directly get the work from the employer, the entire group would make good money. Otherwise, they need to pay commission to the person who informs them about the work availability. According to Mr. Plumber, he also believes that his relationship with the employers and workers has helped him get work offers. He explained, "I am working in the plumbing sector and based in this same area for over 17 years. I have built a good network contacts. Now all the work I get is through these contacts." This made me curious to know why employers seek Mr. Plumber for plumbing work in his region. He told me:

I work sincerely. My work should satisfy the employer. I have never abandoned my work in the middle. Before taking charge of any work, I clarify my limitation to the employers. So far, there hasn't been a single complaint regarding my work. So, I believe that the worker should be professional and ethical to gain opportunities and trust.

(Mr. Plumber, Plumbing sector)

Thus, these experiences of the participants indicate the importance of skills such as communication, presentation, team management, and leadership in getting more jobs in the market. Furthermore, sincerity, ethics, and professionalism are key mantras for expanding the social network and obtaining more work opportunities in construction works.

Professional Safety and Security

In the case of Mr. Dakarmi, he is not affiliated with any Labor's unions. If there are any work-related issues such as not getting payment from employers, he takes help from a local labor's office, which is non-governmental and affiliated with a political party. He has to apply to the office, and after it helps him in getting his money back, it charges 30% of the total money that he received from the employer.

Mr. Painter is also not affiliated with any party-based unions. Rather, he mentioned that the painting companies such as Asian Paints, Berger Paints, and others have unions of painters. He belongs to the Berger group. He expressed, "If I buy color from Berger, or I recommend others to buy Berger color, the company gives me some points which are recorded as our provident fund. Suppose if we get any workplace accident, we get paid by the company." Until now he has not been in any serious accidents, but he is prone to accidents. He revealed, "For a house up to 2-3 story, we use bamboos to climb and color. If we need to go higher than that, we use a rope to climb. There are safety belts also, but we do not care much about it". He shared an incident:

While painting a house, one of my friends was accidentally hit by bamboo which was thrown from the roof. The friend's hand was fractured, and he could not work for a long time. Although the treatment expenses were borne by his contractor and the house owner jointly, due to his inability to work, he could not earn money for a long time.

(Mr. Painter, Painting sector)

Showing a bandaged left hand, Mr. Plumber further shared, "My right hand was cut by a machine while at work. I have yet to purchase insurance." When I inquired about the Contribution Based Social Security Fund, a program of the Nepal Government, he was unaware of its benefits and procedures. He revealed that he was engaged in some political party-based labor unions in the past, but now he has quit all those. He believed that these unions help workers to get their money back from the employers who

intentionally did not make the payment. Nowadays he does not face such problems as he gets direct work from employers. He is more interested in the offers of plumbing companies to get coupon vouchers by marketing their products and increasing sales. He described:

Nowadays, if we purchase goods from a particular company or recommend others to buy the product of that company, the company provides us with coupons. We can use that coupon to claim our commission. Through that money, I buy the necessary tools and equipment.
(Mr. Painter, Painting sector)

Mr. Painter also gets an annual Dashain festival allowance, t-shirts, and bags from a plumbing wholesale shop, where he recommends his customers to go. He revealed that the wholesale shop gives an annual party during Dashain festivals to the plumbers who are in contact with the shop.

Discussions

COVID is bringing hardship to the lives of the construction workers. However, these workers resiliently handled the COVID pandemic. They have initiated many changes in the workplaces such as adopting social distancing, wearing a face mask, using hand sanitizers, avoiding public transportation and outside meals, and so on. Some of them even revealed that they were planning to change their working modalities, for instance, opening a sanitary ware to get more profit. These workers are highly concerned about their family's and colleagues' health and wellbeing. They are updated with the COVID-related news such as lockdowns, vaccinations, and the number of people who have died and the number of those who have recovered. They acknowledge the government's restriction to travel and work; however, it is hard for them to abide by such rules because they are the breadwinners in their families. However, due to the hardships faced, there is a possible risk that some of these workers might give up their professions and opt for foreign works. This resilient living of these workers, induced by the COVID-pandemic, has injected new living strategies

into their livelihood survival. The collective resilience (Sousa et al., 2013) of these informal construction sector workers and the resilience due to hardship and poverty (Posch et al., 2019), have helped these workers to normalize their living amid the pandemic's panic.

The struggling construction workers are somehow getting relief through using their personal contacts to get jobs and their professional security has been maintained through informal structures and organization. This informal mechanism of job search helps them to explore job opportunities themselves. 'Contact' or 'networking' is guided by our social value system of helping each other at times of need, which is also termed as a social capital (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). The social networking of these workers has developed trust amongst themselves, which has helped to explore different work opportunities (Rostila, 2011). These workers have successfully capitalized on the relations developed through their contacts, due to which many of them are able to easily find job even during the pandemic period. However, in some cases, this sort of informal job search mechanism is counterproductive, as the workers have to give a large amount of commissions to brokers in the name of job search. Similarly, the workers are not associated with any professional trade unions, which could help them raise their voices and help them selflessly at the time of need. There is a new trend of uniting workers by companies such as painting based, plumbing based, and others which are welcoming but might need to be under surveillance by the Government for workers' welfare. The formal government organizations should take up the responsibility of professional safety and security of these workers. The Contribution Based Social Security Fund, formed by Nepal Government (Nepal Law Commission, 2017), has not addressed the issues of constructions sector workers yet (Mandal, 2021, June 26), which is utmost needed in the COVID context.

Conclusion

In summary, the lives of construction sector workers

have developed resiliency in the COVID pandemic. These workers have learned new strategies of living such as keeping high concern on personal safety, family's well-being, and exploring employment opportunities through informal networks. Many of their lives came back to normal easily due to the collective resilience in Nepali societies. The collective resilience was germinated due to human poverty that exists in our societies. Besides, a value system of helping each other, which we can term as contact or network or social capital, has eased the livings of these workers. However, there must be a government mechanisms to legitimately guarantee the professional safety and security of these workers. Thereby, although the pandemic hit hard in the lives of the construction sector workers in Nepal, living with the COVID has become possible due to the resiliency and social capital of these workers.

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