

Artisans Working Conditions in the Nigerian Construction Industry: A Case Study of Some States in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examined the wages and working conditions of artisans in the Nigerian construction industry. Data for the study was obtained through structured questionnaire-aided interview. About 89 skilled artisans were interviewed on various construction sites spread across three states of northern Nigeria. Finding revealed poor job security among artisans as most of them were employed on casual/temporary duration, dependent on availability of work. Majority of the artisans' interviewed were not satisfied with their current wages although about 31.46% believe that the wages are fair. The high rate of safety and health hazard faced by workers on construction sites was underscored with about 76.40% of artisans claiming to have being involved in one form of accident or the other on construction sites. Majority of the artisans believed training and career development opportunities in the industry are poor with most workers learning their skills only on the job. A large percentage of the artisans however, seem to appreciate the attitudes of their employers/supervisors towards them. It was concluded from the study that there is need for stakeholders to fashion out measures towards improving work conditions in the construction industry especially in the areas of safety, wages and general working environment with a view to encouraging retention and motivation of workers.

Keywords: Artisans, Construction industry, Wages, Working conditions

Introduction

It is widely recognised worldwide that construction activity plays a vital role in the process of a nation's economic growth and development, both through its products (infrastructure and buildings) and through the employment opportunities created in the process of construction itself (ILO, 2001). The industry is known to provide employment opportunities for a large section of the populace especially in developing countries where construction activities utilises more of human effort than machineries (Muya, et al. 2005, English, 2002 & Ubenyi, 1999). Thus, the effectiveness of the construction industry depends on among other factors, the quality and condition of its workforce. It is however ironical that work in the construction sector is most often characterized by poor image. Issues of job insecurity, poor relationship with employers, low levels of income, poor health and safety record, poor working conditions, coupled with the absence of social security legislations are germane issues to the construction worker (Singh and Bhanushali, 2012 & Garrity, 1999). The working conditions of skilled artisans in the Nigerian construction industry are thus examined with a view to identifying the conditions in which the artisans operate in the sector.

Literature Review

The construction industry contributes significantly in terms of employment generation in both developed and developing economies as it provides an entry point into the labour market for the least educated and other disadvantaged sections of the society (ILO, 2001). The industry is however, characterised

by several challenges and difficulties which most often portrays it in bad light. The poor image of the construction industry is generally thought to stem from the nature of its work, which is often described as 'dirty, difficult and dangerous (ILO, 2001, Kashiwagi & Massner, 2002). A report by Garrity, (1999) reveals that, most young people see construction work as dirty and uninteresting, done in harsh weather by not very intelligent people. A survey of high school students in the United States for example, shows that, out of 250 career options, the choice of construction came 247th as an attractive career option (Kashiwagi & Massner, 2002). It was observed by Bokinni (2005) that, for many people, the construction industry is seen as the employment of 'the last resort', entered into when an alternative is unavailable or just to continue a family tradition.

One of the many reasons why construction work is so poorly regarded by many people as observed by the ILO (2001), has to do with the terms on which labour is recruited in the industry. Many people view the terms of employment of workers in the construction industry to be poor. In Nigeria for example, as in many other developing countries, the informal approach to construction practices is prevalent. Construction workers are mostly employed on a temporary basis through informal contracts. Gunderson (2001) quoted the Economic Council of Canada to have documented that, employment insecurity in the construction industry is four times higher than in manufacturing industry. The prevalence of flexible forms of employment practices such as subcontracting, outsourcing and self-employment has contributed to the insecure nature of employment in the industry. The level of skill in the construction industry has thus

fallen significantly as a result of these developments. The image of the industry has also suffered from these developments, not least in the eyes of its potential workforce. In most part of the world today, work in construction is not regarded as “decent work” (Gunderson, 2001).

Another reason why construction work is poorly regarded has to do with the poor health and safety records of the industry. Adenuga et al. (2007), observed that, the construction industry is a very hazardous industry to work. Each year, a lot of skilled and unskilled workers lose their lives and many more are maimed and injured on construction sites. The ILO (2001) has also disclosed that, workers in the construction industry are most often exposed to dangerous and unsafe working conditions, such as falling from ladders and scaffoldings, injuring selves lifting heavy equipment, breathing toxic fumes, and cut themselves using sharp tools, and etc. Due to the high safety and health risk associated with construction, work in the construction industry is not highly regarded and most people work in the industry out of necessity rather than choice. The ILO (2001) reported that almost universally, construction workers wish for better things for their children. Conditions as characterised by poor and dirty working environment are other contributory factors to the unattractiveness of construction work. In a study on the causes of turnover of labour in the Nigerian construction industry, George (1988) observed that most construction sites are characterised by unhygienic and unsafe environment which serves to discourage potential workers as most people would prefer to work in relatively healthier conditions.

Low wages and Remuneration

Low wages have been identified as a major reason why the construction industry is having problem of attracting and retaining skilled workers (Alao, 2008, Kashiwagi and Massner 2002 & Mackenzie, et al. 2000). Ubenyi (1999) reported that there is high rate of labour instability and employee turnover in the construction industry in Nigeria due to poor wages. A report by Greene and Whyte (2008) also revealed that most craft workers in the US were of the view that low pay, lack of permanent employment, poor safety, poor treatment and poor working condition were the major reasons why their fellow colleagues leave the construction industry. There were assertions by some writers such as Alao (2008) that, low wages have hindered many, especially the youth from venturing into careers in the construction industry in Nigeria because they see nothing good in jobs “that earn but them peanuts”. George (1988) also reported that at least 40% of workers in the Nigerian construction industry leave their respective firms because of poor wage structure. He revealed that most workers complaint that their efforts are grossly exploited by low wages. This has done a lot of harm on the morale of construction workers, making those present to leave and discouraging others from joining the industry.

Research Methodology

Data for the study was obtained through the use of structured questionnaire-aided interviews of skilled artisans in the construction industry. This method was employed based on consideration of the low educational background of most craft workers and their inability and low motivation in responding to

questionnaires. The fact that the questionnaire was written in English and artisans may not have the ability to read English also necessitated the use of interpreters to translate the questions to the local dialect of the workers.

The interviews were conducted on construction sites in three states of Northern Nigeria, viz. Gombe state (North east), Kaduna state (North west) and Niger state (North Central). The samples were selected at random from different sites ranging from large building sites managed by contractors and consultants to small private residential building sites with informal arrangement between clients and skilled artisans. This is because majority of the craftsmen and artisans are employed by both categories of builders. The interview was limited to only those questions on the questionnaire. Other questions outside the questionnaire were not recorded in this report. About 105 artisans were initially targeted for the interviews with 35 questionnaires administered to each of the three states. However, only a total of 89 artisans were successfully interviewed on the various construction sites visited in the three states. This represents 84.8% of the targeted respondents in the study. Data obtained was

analysed using simple descriptive statistics such as percentages, pie charts and bar charts.

Data Presentation

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the interviewed respondents. The table reveals that, about 41.57% of the respondents have attended secondary school with primary school leavers constituting 39.33%. About 15.73% have not attended any formal school system at all while 3.37% reported that they have obtained diploma certificates. None of the craftsmen has a degree qualification. The result disclosed that majority of the craftsmen have some level of formal education. A substantial number of the respondents (about 46.07%) were between the ages of 18 and 35 years while those between the ages of 35 and 45years constitute 25.84%. The number of respondents with more than 45year of age was 21.35%. The foregoing shows that youth constitute a substantial number of artisans on construction sites (even if it is an occurrence of last resort). Thus the finding is apparently at variance with the assertion of Alao (2008) that Nigerian youth especially are not interested in joining careers in the construction industry.

Table 1: *Characteristic of Respondents*

	Respondent's Data	Frequency	Percentage
Educational Qualifications	No Education at all	14	15.73
	Primary Education	35	39.33
	Secondary Education	37	41.57
	Diploma	3	3.37
	Degree	0	0.00
Age of Respondents	Under 18yrs	6	6.74
	18-25yrs	20	22.47
	25-35yrs	21	23.60
	35-45yrs	23	25.84
	Above 45 years	19	21.35
Mode of Skills Acquisition	Formal Vocational Training school	16	17.98
	Apprenticeship	19	21.35
	On-the-job experience	54	60.67
Construction skills (Trade)	Mason/bricklayer	22	24.7
	Carpenter	18	20.2
	Iron bender	9	10.1
	Tiler	6	6.7
	Electrician	8	9.0
	Plumber	9	10.1
	Painter	14	14.7
	Interior decorators	3	3.4
State of Respondents	Gombe	36	40.45
	Kaduna	29	32.58
	Niger	24	26.97

About 60.67% of the artisans obtained their trade skills informally through practical, on-the-job experience. Those that obtained their skills through formal vocational training schools constitute only 17.98% of the respondents. About 19 of the respondents (21.35%) claimed they got their skills through apprenticeship programmes. This shows that majority of the artisans obtained their skills

through informal means implying that their skills and competencies are not formally tested and certified. The distribution of respondents by trade shows that Masons/Bricklayers constitute 24.7%; followed by Carpenters with 20.2% and Painters 15.7%. Artisans with low number of respondents were Electricians (9.0%), Tilers (6.7%) and Interior decorators who constitute 3.4% of the respondents.

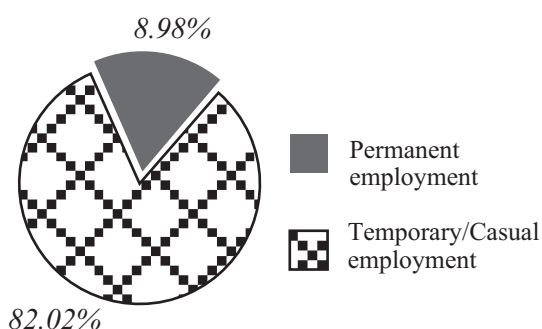


Figure 1: Employment Status of Respondents

Figure 1 reveals that 82.02% of the artisans were employed on temporary/casual basis. This category of workers includes those employed on daily basis depending on work availability and trade skills needed on site. Others include those craftsmen and artisans employed for a fixed term or on task basis for the duration of the project. Only about 8.98% of the artisans claimed they were employed on permanent basis. The result has further confirmed the high prevalence of temporary employment in the construction industry and shows the degree of lack of job security for this category of workers (ILO, 2001).

Wages of Artisans

The daily average wage of artisans was obtained (Table 2). This was done by dividing the sum of the minimum and maximum amounts obtainable per day for each trade category. Majority of the workers are paid on daily basis with very few paid on weekly and monthly basis. Some of the workers are however paid based on task basis. The wages vary between N2, 500 and N3, 000 per day depending on trade. This puts the average monthly remuneration for these workers at between N50, 000 and N60, 000 per month taking into account 20 actual working days per month. The amount seems reasonable

especially when compared with the minimum monthly wage of public civil servants in Nigeria which currently stands at N18, 000. However, the high prevalence of temporary/casual nature of employment for the construction industry workers means there will be number of days of non-employment per month/annum. Hence, their actual monthly/annual earnings appear far less to cater for them and their family needs.

Table 2: Characteristic of Respondents

Trade	Daily Average Wages (₦)
Mason/bricklayer	2,750
Carpenter	2,500
Iron bender	2,500
Tiler	2,500
Plumber	2,750
Painter	2,500
Electrician	2,750
Interior decorator	3,000

The respondents were asked to describe their perceptions on their current wages as presented in Figure 2. The result shows that 21.35% of respondent describe their wages as attractive with 2.25% describing it as very attractive. About 31.46% feels that wages are fair. Majority of the artisans (41.57%) however, consider wages as poor with 3.37% describing it as very poor. The result indicates that majority of the artisans were not satisfied with their earnings. The issue of low wages for artisans and craftsmen has been identified as a major problem hindering many from venturing into careers in the construction industry (Alao, 2008 & Ubenyi, 1999). Most workers and their families depend almost entirely on this wages for their basic needs (food, shelter, clothing, medication etc).

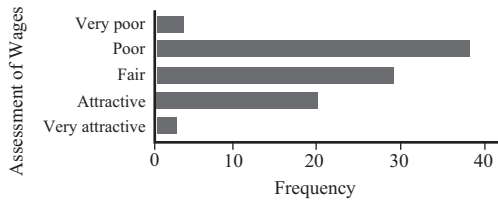


Figure 2: Workers' Assessment of Wages

Satisfaction with working environment

About 43.82% of the respondent believes their working environment is poor with 7.87 adjudging the working environment as very poor. Only 17.98% think the working environment is good with 26.97% describing it as fair. The working environment here refers to the physical working environment in terms of its convenience, safety and ease of movement and work, which Garrity (1999) regarded as contributing to the poor image of the construction industry.

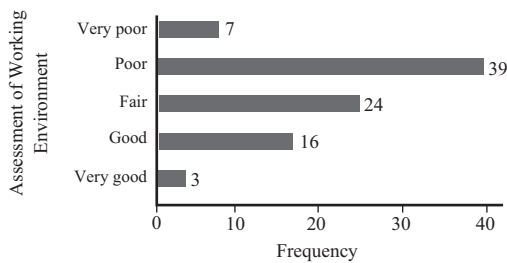


Figure 3: Level of Satisfaction with working environment

Artisan's involvement in site accidents

Figure 4 shows that about 61.80% of respondents had suffered one form of accident or the other during the course of work in the construction industry. Only 38.20% of the respondent reported they have not suffered any form of accidents. The result has further highlighted the poor safety record of the construction industry.

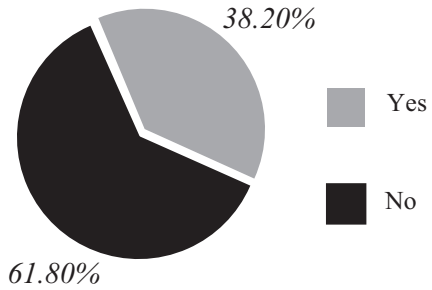


Figure 4: Respondent's involvement in accidents on sites

Employers' support in cases of accidents

The study sought to identify the level of support enjoyed by workers from their employers/supervisors during the event of accidents as shown in Figure 5. The employers support ranges from voluntary financial support, payment of sick artisan's medical bills and conditional support in form of loan to the sick workers. About 58.43% of the respondents (Figure 4) claimed that their employers were supportive and fairly supportive towards their plight. However, 32.58% of the respondent reported that their employers/supervisors did not support them at all when they had site accident.

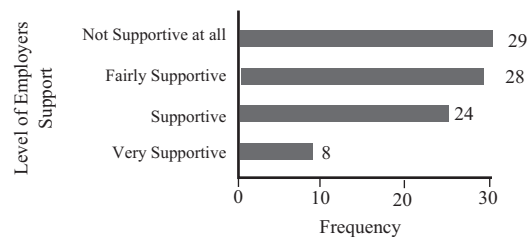


Figure 5: Level of Employers' support during cases of accident

Training and career development opportunities
The artisans also expressed their perceptions on the training and career development

opportunities in the construction industry, where 39.33% and 23.60% of the respondents described career development opportunities as poor and very poor respectively. Only about 11.34 % were of the view that career development opportunities are good with 21.35% describing opportunities as fair.

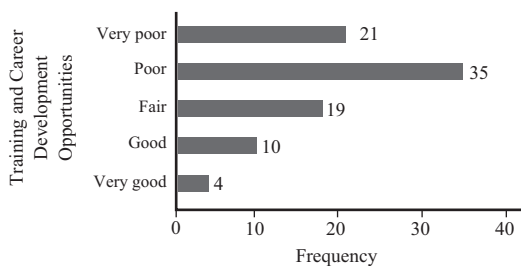


Figure 6: Assessment of Training and career development opportunities

The finding was not surprising at all as majority of the artisans have reported learning their trades informally on the job (their competencies not having been tested and certified). The ILO (2001) has emphasised on the need for the construction industry especially in developing countries to develop a training and skill certification avenues for the large number of informally trained artisans in the construction industry in order to enhance their competencies and improve their bargaining power in the industry.

Attitudes of supervisors and employers

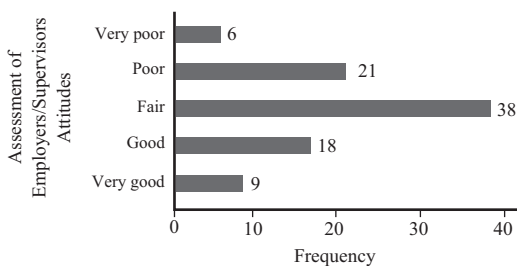


Figure 7: Assessment of employers /supervisors attitudes

Figure 7 shows the views of artisans on the attitudes of their employers/supervisors. The attitude is referring to how the employers/supervisors relate with the artisan such as the way they talked to them, how friendly or cordially they relate with their workers. Majority of the respondents describe the attitudes of employers and supervisors as fair (42.67%) with 20.22% and 10.11% describing their attitudes as good and very good respectively. Only about 23.60% of the respondents described employers'/supervisors' attitudes as poor; with 6.7% saying it is very poor. This indicate that majority of the artisan have good working relationship with their supervisors and employers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study has revealed that majority of the artisans in the study are employed on casual/temporary basis with the duration of employment dependent on availability of work; hence job security was considered to be poor. Although a reasonable percentage of the workers seem to appreciate their wages, majority however, feels there is need for improvement with regard to the current wages obtainable in the industry. A reasonable number of respondents express dissatisfaction with the working environment. Findings also underscored the high health and safety risk faced by artisans with about 61.80% reporting to have suffered one form of accident or the other during the course of work on construction sites. Majority of respondents adjudged the training and career development opportunities in the construction industry to be poor. Most artisans obtained their skills through informal on-the-job training without being availed to any formal training facility. A large percentage

of the artisans appreciated the attitude of their employers and supervisors towards them. It was concluded from the study that there is need for more improvements in the working conditions of artisans especially in the areas of wages, safety, and general career development opportunities.

It is recommended that, the construction industry in Nigeria should work out a scheme of reasonable wage structure for artisans in all parts of the country to put them at par with their counterparts in other competitive industries. This is necessary in order to entice and encourage retention of skilled workers in the construction industry. Due to widespread prevalence of informally trained artisans in the industry, it is also recommended that a Skills Certification Scheme be introduced to provide a unified basis for standardising training and certifying the competencies of all craftsmen irrespective of their initial training background. This will benefit the artisans by improving their employment prospects wage satisfaction, and job sustenance

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