

# FACTORS AFFECTING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH OF FOREIGN WORKERS IN THE SAUDI CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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## ABSTRACT

*The Saudi construction industry is considered as the fastest growing and largest sector in the Gulf region with ongoing construction projects valued at US\$475 billion. The booming construction sector in Saudi Arabia portrays a positive impression. However, the occupational health and safety (OHS) situation paints a different picture. Particularly, the psychological health of foreign workers is at a great risk due to the unfavourable work conditions they are faced with. The OHS related studies conducted in this region so far have focused on technical, managerial and physical aspects of safety and have neglected the psychological health of foreign construction workers. This indicates an urgent need for research into this area. Hence, this research explored what factors affect the psychological health of migrant workers in the Saudi construction industry. An interview survey with 30 experts from the Saudi construction industry and other relevance sectors were conducted. A thematic analysis of the data collected from the interviews identified several critical factors that affect the psychological health of foreign construction workers, including: low wage; delay of payment; withholding workers passports; mistreatments by supervisors; long shifts without breaks; lack of vacations; poor accommodations conditions; and disregard for mental health of workers. The study lays the foundation for establishing a mechanism to combat the factors that deteriorate the psychological health of foreign workers in the Saudi construction industry.*

**Keywords:** Foreign Construction Workers; Occupational Health and Safety; Psychological Health; Saudi Arabia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia is in the process of rapid economic growth as a result of an increase in oil prices over the last few years. The Saudi economy is ranked as the world's twenty-third largest and one of the world's fastest growing countries; per capita income in 2007 was US\$20,700 and it is forecasted to rise to US\$33,500 by 2020 (SAGIA, 2011). The Saudi construction industry sector is considered as the fastest growing and largest market in the Gulf region with on-going construction projects valued at US\$475 billion and business investment opportunities through to 2020 are estimated at US\$1.4 trillion (USSABC, 2009).

The booming construction sector in Saudi Arabia provides a positive impression. However, the occupational health and safety situation paints a different picture. According to GOSI annual reports for the years 2003 - 2009, the construction sector is represented heavily in workplace-related accidents. For example, in 2009, the percentage of the construction sector was 50.2% of all work related accidents. A vast majority of them are foreign workers. For example, records in 2012 showed that 36,367 people had a work related injury, and more than 98% of them were foreign workers from different countries (GOSI, 2013).

Hohnen and Hasle (2011) criticised the current practices of Occupational Health and Safety Management (OHSM) systems which heavily focus on technical aspects and neglect complex workplace issues such as psychosocial risks. Hohnen and Hasle (2011) and Widerszal-Bazyl *et al.* (2008) observed that employers are either not aware or unwilling to see psychosocial risk as an integral aspect of work health and safety.

Psychological health are among the factors that affect workers on construction sites (Choudhry and Fang, 2008). For example, Siu *et al.* (2004) reported a strong correlation between job dissatisfaction and

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worker psychological conditions with the rate of work-related accidents and injuries. Psychological health can be defined as “state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (CSA, 2013).

The psychological health of workers in developing countries face more challenges than in developed countries. For example, a report by World Health Organisation pointed out that developed countries are more familiar about how to deal with work related stress more than developing countries (WHO, 2007). Among those developing countries, Saudi Arabia has been chosen for study because of its specific nature with significant challenges on the psychological health of foreign workers in the construction industry. There is a high proportion of foreigners, 7.5 million, who represented more than 25% of residents (Arabnews, 2013). Saudi Arabia recorded 266 suicides cases in 2006, more than 60% of them were foreigners (Al-Awsat, 2008) and this rose to 787 suicides cases in 2009 (Al-Ibrahim, 2012). This study aims to investigate the factor affecting the psychological health of foreign construction workers in Saudi Arabia.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. STUDIES ON OHS MANAGEMENT IN THE SAUDI CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY**

Jannadi (1995) carried out research on the impact of human relations on the safety of construction workers. The study focused on construction and maintenance workers who were involved in pipeline activities for a large construction company in the city Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The aims were to shed some light on the factors that significantly influence the safety performance of construction projects. The findings showed that small groups had better safety records than big groups. According to the research, this could be because they got along well, and discussed their personal problems with each other. Therefore, the friendly atmosphere among crew members is important in improving safety. The relationship between management and workers plays a significant role in improving safety performance. Moreover, the competition between workers, and working under pressure had a negative impact on workers' safety performance (Jannadi, 1995).

Jannadi and Al-Sudairi (1995) conducted research to evaluate the safety programs of construction companies in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The study noted that as the firm gets larger, its safety program becomes more formal and tends to result in a better OHS performance overall. It was found that safe firms had the following qualities: field safety representatives have direct relations with top management; training; good reporting systems and safety awards to workers (Jannadi and Al-Sudairi, 1995).

Jannadi and Assaf (1998) tried to assess the level of safety practiced in different construction projects in Saudi Arabia. They assessed whether safety levels differ according to the project size or not. The researchers found that safety levels in construction sites vary according to project size. They also established that safety records in large projects, generally maintained by large international companies, are significantly better than smaller ones (Jannadi and Assaf, 1998).

Jannadi and Bu-Khamsin (2002) undertook research to find out the factors that affect the safety performance level of construction contractors, and to know the extent that these factors affect safety performance. The authors conducted a literature review to identify significant factors affecting safety performance of industrial contractors. Moreover, they developed a preliminary list of main factors and their associated sub-factors and they conducted formal interviews with key safety personnel of contractors and with certified safety experts to assess the identified factors. The results showed that the main factors were management involvement, personal protective equipment, emergency or disaster planning and preparation, ionisation radiation, scaffolding and ladders, crane and lifting equipment, electrical equipment, excavation, trenching and shoring, and mechanical equipment (Jannadi and Bu-Khamsin, 2002).

Jannadi (2008) studied the risks associated with trenching works in Saudi Arabia. The research discussed the general safety aspects of trenching work and introduced and evaluated the government's role in trenching safety. In order to minimise the risks related to trench work the research recommended that

contractors should consider important issues such as providing all safety equipment, training their people for safe work practices, and applying all safety measures on job sites at all times. Moreover, the government has a role to play, which is conducting site inspections and enforcing safety with penalties when they are required (Jannadi, 2008).

The topic of OHS management in the Saudi construction sector is poorly researched. The review on the previous research related to OHS in the construction industry in Saudi Arabia indicates that the number of studies remains very low and do not reflect the true size and seriousness of the problem, which indicate an urgent need for further critical research in this area. Moreover, most studies have focused on technical, managerial and the physical safety aspects and have neglected other significant causes of the problem like the psychological health of construction workers.

## **2.2. FACTORS AFFECTING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH OF WORKERS**

One of the earliest studies related to occupational psychological health was a study by Cohen and Margolis (1973). They reviewed the research conducted using different classifications which were: detect occupational hazards with the use of behavioural methods, neurophysiological and behavioural disorders from physical conditions and chemical exposer, individual differences influencing worker health and safety, job stress and workers' health and psychological strategies for enhancing the practices of health and safety.

Sauter *et al.* (1990) tried to develop a national strategy in a comprehensive manner to promote and protect workers' psychological health in USA. The authors highlighted that the psychological disorders are the leading problem for the workers' occupational health. The suggested strategy focused on the general concern of psychological disorders in the field of occupational health of those being usually investigated under the general topics of "job stress" which are amenable to interventions in the workplace (Sauter *et al.*, 1990).

Braun (2001) studied Turkish workers' psychological health and intercultural communication in the American-German workplace in Germany. The author described the historical background of the Turkish immigration to Germany and explained the harsh situation that they faced such as discrimination, violence, harassment, murder and burning houses by/from local extremists in order to expel them from the country. The study pointed out the Turkish workers struggled in the new environment to adjust psychologically. Their study revealed "participants felt significantly more positive about working with Americans than with Germans on several dimensions of psychological health, including happiness, confidence, satisfaction, and comfort" (Braun, 2001).

Siu *et al.* (2004) tested the relationship between safety climate, psychological distress and job satisfaction (psychological strains), and safety performance. The authors argued that workers who had large performance pressure focussed on work completion rather than safety procedures. They surveyed workers from construction sites in Hong Kong. Their findings partially supported the hypothesised model that safety attitudes and psychological distress predict accident rates and occupational injuries. According to the study result, the mediator between accident rates and safety attitude was psychological distress (Siu *et al.*, 2004).

## **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

The aim of this study was to explore the factors affecting the psychological health of foreign workers in the Saudi construction industry. It was realised that an interview survey with different experts from the construction industry and related sectors is a practical and effective way to collect data needed. The interviews took place in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia, where all construction companies hold offices. Altogether thirty (30) interviews were conducted and the interviewees included: construction workers, construction managers, construction supervisors, site engineers, and other experts from related disciplines such as psychologists, social workers, OHS authority professionals and insurers.

A thematic analysis using Nvivo software was conducted on the qualitative data collected from the interviews. The issues, challenges, problems and suggestions presented by the respondents were broken down into a number of general themes. Then, in winnowing the themes, phrases that may be integrated

were joined as a single concept. Then the phrases were linked to each other, as concepts may be interrelated, for the purpose of identifying the problems affecting the psychological health of workers.

#### **4. STUDY FINDINGS**

Eight critical factors that affect the psychological health of foreign construction workers are discussed here, which are directly related to the practices of construction companies and can be treated as internal factors to the construction organisations.

##### **4.1. LOW WAGES**

Construction companies are paying one of the lowest wages. The current wage is around US\$266 per month, which is considered very low by respondents who compared their income with other sectors. This low wage does not allow them to live a decent life because they end up sending most of their income to their families back home. For example, workers complained that with the low wages they receive it is difficult to buy proper food; one worker stated that he had not eaten meat for weeks and just had bread and vegetables because he could not afford. Another worker spoke of the costs of calls. He uses a cellular phone to communicate with his wife. He just communicates by text messages because he cannot afford the expensive price of voice calling.

Moreover, an employee of the General Organisation for Social Insurance (GOSI) indicated that some companies do not provide them with the actual statistics and figures, especially with the real amount of salaries that are being paid to their workers. He further said that fewer amounts are declared so as to reduce the annual premium. This kind of dishonesty in reporting would have a serious impact on workers when accidents happen to them that they can receive only a small compensation from insurance.

##### **4.2. DELAY OF PAYMENT**

Delaying the wages of workers in construction projects is commonly found in Saudi Arabia. Salaries may be delayed for long periods, sometimes for months. This irregularity led protests and strikes in spite Saudi authorities and law prevent any demonstrations or protest rallies. This culture severely impacts the psychological health of workers. For example, a project manager recalled that a worker from his project committed suicide for not being able to cope with the life pressures caused by a long delay of payments from his employer.

##### **4.3. POOR ACCOMMODATIONS CONDITIONS**

Housing problems are common issues at most construction sites in Saudi. For example, a site supervisor said that some companies provide mattresses on the floor or bunk beds but the workers were all lumped together in one room. Moreover, labour camps are often overcrowded, unhygienic and uncomfortable. These affect workers' morale and mental health. Moreover, they cannot have adequate rest to recover from the tiredness.

##### **4.4. WITHHOLDING WORKERS PASSPORTS**

In Saudi Arabia, some negative practices like withholding workers' passports are common; especially passports belong to workers from development countries. A respondent who had worked there as an engineer said that the company management tried to withhold her passport but she refused and she thought that because she was from a western country the company did not put further pressure on her. A respondent said that workers' passports are sometimes withheld by management because this is their "hold" on workers, which allows them to delay their payments, extend the stay without workers' willingness and put them in any project or working condition even if the workers do not like.

#### **4.5. MISTREATMENTS FROM SUPERVISORS**

Respondents indicated that inhumane treatment at work was a common issue. Workers would suffer from harsh words and physical abuse by supervisors. Based on the responses, these inhuman treatments consisted sometimes of physically hitting workers should they fail in their performance.

One of the supervisors said that management of the construction company believes in the concept that being employers, they have the right to control the workers and demand from them quality and work productivity through their presence of mind and not just the body alone. They work for a living, so they have to conform to the standards of the company which starts off with presence of mind, focus, and concentration at work. This comment indicates the appalling mind set of many construction supervisors in Saudi Arabia.

#### **4.6. LONG WORK SHIFTS WITHOUT BREAKS**

Respondents expressed long work hours without breaks as an important problem on construction sites. A number of interviewees commented on the long work hours, like, from 6 a.m to 5 p.m. The long work hours call for reasonable work breaks, like a short time for a quick nap, coffee, or a drink of water. Moreover, working such long hours in the extreme weather can be very exhausting. However, workers are not allowed to have such short breaks. Even traveling for a long time in a non-air conditioned bus to go to work and to return from work on a very hot weather condition, especially in the desert area, is already stressful enough and exhausting.

Moreover, a project manager indicated the inadequacy of rest for workers and time to prepare for the workers' dinner. They have to travel for another two hours from the construction site to the place of accommodation. The long work hours did not allow the workers to have adequate rest once they were back in their sleeping quarters or respective accommodation.

#### **4.7. LACK OF VACATIONS**

The contracts between construction companies and workers allow them to have two months of paid vacations every two years. However, some of the workers accept their companies offer not to take vacations and keep working in return of getting the ticket money. Even if this practice is legal, the psychological experts said that workers as human beings need regular breaks. Being apart from their families and having to work continuously can have serious negative effects on their mental and physical conditions.

#### **4.8. DISREGARD FOR MENTAL HEALTH OF WORKERS**

A vast majority of construction workers in Saudi Arabia are foreigners who are breadwinners of their respective wives and families whom they have left behind in their home countries. There are difficulties in obtaining permission to bring their families to live with them in Saudi Arabia. Workers thus tend to live bachelors' lives to save some income. The psychologist observed that one common problem among workers is that they suffer from what is called the "Adjustment Disorder", whereby they face difficulties in adjusting to new conditions. He said that the social, family, homesick and other variables and hard conditions cause lots of pressure on the workers. He further cited recent statistics in Saudi, where the rate of suicide occurrences among foreigner workers is higher. Companies do not consider this important factor nor do they have any system in place to help workers adjust to the new environment gradually. Rather they treat workers as if they were machines.

### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The construction industry focusses more on the physical health of workers and do not give much attention to their psychological state. Occupational health psychology is a new area of study, which is relevant to labour and human resource management. This is evidenced by the lack or even absence of programs within construction companies that look into the welfare of workers' psychological, mental, or emotional state. Ideally, however, workers "should be seen as an integral part of the business and not just instruments to be exploited and discarded after the project".

Management's consideration of workers' psychological problems and their underlying reasons will help in improving workers' psychological health. Since psychological health is an intrinsic factor involved in the health and safety of workers, there is a need for more attention from construction companies to better understand and manage the psychological health of workers. This paper explored some of the factors affecting the psychological health of migrant workers in the Saudi construction industry namely: low payment, delay of payment, poor accommodations conditions, withholding workers passports, long work shifts without breaks, mistreatments from supervisors, lack of vacations and disregard for mental health of workers,. The study paves the way to devise a mechanism to combat workplace conditions that deteriorate the psychological health of foreign workers in the Saudi construction industry. Further studies are underway to develop an intervention framework for minimising the effects of these conditions on foreign construction workers.

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