Health Hazards, Risk and Safety Practices in Construction Sites – A Review Study

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Abstract: This review attempts to identify the health hazards, risks and causes of poor safety practices in construction sites. In addition, the differences in safety practices in both developed and developing countries and methods to improve construction site safety are discussed.

Effects of some health hazards are chronic while some are acute. Mostly reported acute health hazards are “workers fall from height” and “electric shocks”, while mostly reported chronic health hazard is “exposure to hazardous substances”.

Lack of awareness about site safety and dislike to wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) were identified as main causes of poor safety practices in construction sites. One of the major needs with regard to the construction industry is to enhance professionals’ interests in active safety management and implementation of awareness programs, which must be developed and implemented among construction workers. Awareness on possible risk factors and knowledge on how to reduce these risk factors among workers and contractors will enhance site safety.

Key words: Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), Site management, Workers.

1. Introduction

Construction site is a very important place, as a considerable number of workers are involved in construction activities. Employments in construction site can be categorized into three groups; “Management and technical” work force, “Skilled” work force and “Semi-skilled and Unskilled” work force. Personnel with high educational qualifications, usually graduates, trained to design, manage and instruct the construction processes can generally be identified as “Management and technical” work force. Persons who possess extensive knowledge and experience in their construction activities or profession are identified as “Skilled” work force. “Semi-skilled and Unskilled” work forces are the site labourers with little or no construction knowledge. Generally, all skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers are at risk of being injured, death or various illnesses in a construction site, although the level of risk varies with activities they are engaged in.

A hazard is a potential source of harm or an adverse health effect on a person or persons. “Hazard” and “Risk” are often used interchangeably. Workers of construction sites are, generally, exposed to an excessive risk of being injured at work (Almenet al. [4]). Pungvongsanuraks et al[28] elicited that construction industry is unique and complex compared with other industries and it contains a wide range of construction materials and products, building services, manufactures, contractors, sub-contractors, design, operation, and refurbishment services. These complexities make the construction industry as one of the most hazardous industries that causes high rate of accidents.

Safety in construction sites is needed to be highly considered in order to reduce the risk of being injured at work. Safety is also identified as one of the major factors affecting the image of the project manager and the organization (Grandjean. [36]). “Safety, health and welfare on construction sites”, the training manual published by the International Labour Office in Geneva[37], states that high rate of accidents occurs in the construction industry than in the other manufacturing sector. This is
possibly because the construction industry consists of high self-employed workers, and large number of seasonal and migrant workers; many of them are unfamiliar with construction processes. In addition, those workers are exposed to bad weather and involved in many different trades and occupations. However, the manual published by International Labour Office in Geneva [37] stated that, “The concerned work should be safe and conditions on the construction site should not cause damage to life, health and professional skills”. Further, it[37] explains that employer needs to have safety norms and health standards; there should be safety practices in construction sites to be followed by the employer. Effective safety management is to make the environment safe, to make the job safe and to make workers safety conscious. In recent years, many developed countries have considered safety as one of the important management issues of construction projects, especially, personal safety (Chen et al[7]).

Objective of this study is to review previous research studies on investigation of health hazards and risks in construction sites to identify causes of poor safety practices and methods for improving construction site safety.

2. Methodology

The articles, which had “construction safety, health hazards” as keywords in research papers, were identified. These papers have been published in journals, conference proceedings and technical reports in the respective official websites. Out of 200 articles, only thirty-seven articles were selected and reviewed, in order to identify the health hazards and risks in construction sites, causes of lacking safety practices and possible methods to improve safety in construction sites.

3. Health risks, poor safety practices and methods to improve site safety

Health hazards and risk factors associated with construction activities, identified from previous studies, are presented in this section. In addition, causes of poor safety practices and possible methods to enhance safety practices were also identified.

3.1 Health hazards and risks

A hazard is a potential source of harm or an adverse health effect on persons. Risk is the likelihood that a person may be harmed or suffered from adverse health effects if exposed to a hazard. Therefore, risk can be minimized, although the hazard is there.

Two major hazards that are common in construction sites have been identified by Abdul et al [21]. Physical injury hazards are often caused by equipment used such as scaffolds, power access equipment, ladders, plant and machinery for excavation and processes such as manual handling, and roof work (Abdul et al [21]). These hazards can cause direct injury to workers at site and, if severe, it can even cause death. Different types of mechanical energy such as noise, vibration, radiation and temperature extremes (i.e. hot and cold) can also cause physical injury hazards. Noise is inevitable in construction sites due to the nature of construction activities. However, in a previous study (Archer [33]) construction noise has been identified as one of the risks, which can cause hearing loss (one of the adverse health effects). Chemical hazards found in construction work include asbestos, welding fumes, spray paints, cutting oil mists, solvents and hexavalent chromium (Pendlebury et al [17]). Construction workers consider dust as the major chemical hazard. In addition, workers consider asbestos, cement and adhesives or solvents, to be the materials that can adversely affect their health.

Effects of some health hazards are chronic while some are acute, as categorised in Table 1. Chronic effects usually develop slowly, and shall cause sickness or death after a certain period. For example, if a worker breathes small amounts of asbestos fibres, he may not notice the effect of that, because there are no acute effects. However, if the worker inhales small amount of asbestos fibres for a prolonged time, the chances of getting asbestos related diseases (i.e., a lung cancer) will increase. Workers neglect the health hazards having chronic effects. Mostly reported chronic health hazards is “exposure to hazardous substances” (Table 1). Further, chronic health hazards include exposure to corrosive materials, skin sanitizers and irritants, (Table 1) that were also identified as risk factors in several previous studies.
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Table 1 - Health hazards identified in previous studies

| Health hazards | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H |
|----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Physical hazards (Noise, Heat, Humidity, Solar Radiation, Radiation from nuclear power plants) | × | | | | | | | |
| Asbestos (insulation board, ceiling tiles, pipe lagging) | | | | | | | | |
| Ionizing radiation (welding) | | | | | | | | |
| Corrosive materials (Concrete, brick acid) | | | | | | | | |
| Skin sanitizers, irritants(Bitumen, acids, alkalis, cement) | | | | | | | | |
| Contaminated land and materials (Old buildings, redundant gas works) | | | | | | | | |
| Hazardous substances | | | | | | | | |
| Vibratory tools | | | | | | | | |
| Sewage (Dirty water) | | | | | | | | |
| Compressed air environment (Seawater and tunnels) | | | | | | | | |
| Environmental with limited lighting (tunnelling) | | | | | | | | |
| Improper housekeeping | | | | | | | | |
| Ladder | | | | | | | | |
| Roof work | | | | | | | | |
| Lifting, carrying or moving heavy tools or materials | | | | | | | | |
| Harmful chemicals | | | | | | | | |
| Plant and machinery, tool usage | | | | | | | | |
| Fire and emergency | | | | | | | | |
| Excavating in deep trenches | | | | | | | | |
| Workers fall from height | | | | | | | | |
| Electric shocks | | | | | | | | |
| Protective clothing | | | | | | | | |

A Abdul et al [21] Malaysia B Pendlebury [17] United Kingdom, C Rameezdeen et al [18] Sri Lanka, D Farooquet al [24] Pakistan, E Zhao et al [31] United States, F Jackson et al [13] United States, G Kaskutas et al [14] America, HKun HU et al [15] America

Workers, who are being exposed to vibration,
noise and many other hazards, also face with
chronic health effects, although they are often
not aware of them. Work-related back pain,
work-related upper limb disorder, hand-arm
vibration syndrome, work-related dermatitis,
respiratory diseases, skin sanitizers,
pneumoconiosis-Asbestos, pneumoconiosis-
Silicosis, radiation diseases (ionizing radiation),
heat stress, ultraviolet radiation, hyperbaric
risks and decompression illness are common
health problems among construction workers
(Pendlebury et al.,[17]).

Mostly reported health hazards having acute
effects are “workers fall from height”, and
“electric shocks”. In addition, ladder, roof
work, lifting, carrying or moving heavy tools or
materials, harmful chemicals, plant and
machinery, tool usage, fire and emergency
excavating in deep trenches and protective
clothing, that were identified as risk factors in
several previous studies, can be considered as
health hazards having acute effects (Table 1).

Workers considered working in high levels as
the principal construction risk activity (Table
1). Scaffolds contribute towards the accident
occurrences at the construction workplace
(Ismail and Ghani, [12]). In general, injury may
lead by three dependant levels: near miss,
incident and accident. Collapsing of a scaffold
is an “incident” in the construction sites. If
there are no injuries and damages to workers
because of collapsing of the scaffold, it is
introduced as “near miss” and if the incidents
lead to injury or damage it is called as an
“accident”. “Risk and hazard are allocated in
first level which means near miss, therefore, no
on-time identification of hazard and risk causes
to create incident and preventing accident in
incident stage is unavoidable”(Charehzehi and
Ahankoob [6]).

3.2 Causes of poor safety practices

Possible causes of poor safety practices, that
were identified from previous studies are
summarised in Table 2. The identified possible
causes of poor safety practices can be
categorized into safety equipment, safety
management, safety attitude of workers, safety
training and others.
“Dislike to wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)”, which are categorized under “Safety equipment”, is often identified as the cause of poor safety practices (Table 2). In addition, “Low level of awareness toward using PPE” was also frequently identified as a possible cause of poor safety practices. This was identified, possibly, because unskilled workers, who have less educational levels, were found to be over presented among accident victims (Rameezdeen et al [18]). Unavailability of PPE also contributes to poor safety practices. In a study by Ahamad et al [22], it has been found that hardhats are often used in construction sites and safety boots are occasionally used. However, Hi-Viz jackets are rarely used in construction sites. Safety gloves, earplugs and safety glasses are also very rarely used in construction sites. Availability of PPE was studied by Tam et al [20] and most commonly provided PPE were identified as gloves, hard hats and eye goggles, although many workers consider that hard hats are not convenient for their operations. However, Jackson et al [13] have elicited that wearing PPE and awareness of surrounding as the most common suggestion to prevent critical accidents.

Failure to appoint a safety officer was often identified as a cause of scarcity of site safety (Table 2). However, effects of “Safety attitude of workers” and “Safety training” have not often been studied, although “no willingness to follow safety norms” by workers was identified as a cause of poor safety practices.

Tam et al [20] showed that in the construction industry, workers have high mobility and they switch from one organisation to another, frequently. The transient nature of the construction workforce makes it difficult to train workers. However, availability of trained or
skilled workers directly contributes to the improvement of quality of construction work, and indirectly contributes to improve the site safety. It has been suggested by Gunawardana and Jayawardane [26] that providing good training facilities for workers would help to retain skilled work force in construction sites. This might be a possible solution to sustain a skilled work force on a long-term basis in construction sites compared to the other industries. Further, Tam et al[20] found that 24% of contractors provide systematic training on safety for the first line workers, 65% of contractors offer occasional training, 11% of contractors provide training very rarely. It seems, in China, many organizations provide occasional training on site safety to workers. A survey, similar to Ahamedet al [22], has been conducted to explore the status of construction safety management, by Tam et al [20]. 62% of the construction organisations do not have documented safety manuals. However, all the respondents(safety representatives in construction organisations who participated in the survey) had documented procedures for safety management on construction sites. In this study, it has been reported that majority of workers are not aware of safety manual. Nevertheless, others are in the opinion that safety issues are discussed and presented at other meetings, such as construction progress meetings.

Site management seemed to be non-interested in emphasizing the need of personnel safety practices among their workers (Ahamedet al, [22]), although this might not be very common in nowadays. In some cases, safety is considered as part of Total Quality Management (TQM) (Husin et al, [11]). In addition, Hassana et al [10] have revealed that good organizational commitment and communication are highly associated with effective accident reporting, high line management commitment and active personal role. Active personal role to safety and health resulted in greater influence among workmates, and low obstacles to safety behaviour according to the Hassana et al [10].

Farooqui et al [24] have found that, workers and other staff members are sometimes under the influence of alcohol, and drugs possibly because they are not tested for drugs and alcohol before starting and during activities in the construction sites (Table 2). However, these previous studies were limited to collecting opinions of professionals, based on their experience related to accidents at building construction sites. Workers’ views on causes for accidents will also be helpful to enhance safety practices in construction sites.

3.3 Possible methods to improve construction site safety

Managing a project successfully means not just executing it according to specifications within the stipulated time and with budgeted funds but also with optimum safety (Belel and Muhmud[5]). In addition, it has been stated that, “enhancing safety performance in construction site is not easy but possible” (Charehzehi and Ahankoob [6]). Possible methods to improve construction safety were identified by reviewing previous studies and are summarised in Table 3.

The mostly suggested method to improve construction safety is related to “Safety management” (Table 3). Nevertheless, most of the identified poor causes of construction safety are categorized under “Safety equipment”. This suggests that safety management at the organisational level can improve organisational performance as stated by Agwa et al [2]. In addition, one of the essential steps for safety management in construction sites is hazard identification, since the most unmanageable risks are from unidentified hazards (Zolfagharian et al [32]).

To improve site safety, contractors in construction sites are advised to, have an organizational safety policy for the proper administration of safety, provide formal safety training for their workers and conduct daily “toolbox” safety talks. In addition, they are advised to conduct weekly formal safety meetings at the project level, always secure safety protection measures at the job site, always provide PPE to their workers, post safety signs and posters at the job site, conduct weekly safety inspections, reward workers for their safe behaviour, personalize workers for their unsafe behaviour, encourage workers to make use of secure equipment and reduce labour turnover rates less than 25 % (El-Mashaleh et al, [9]).

Mahalingam and Raymond [16] have identified using coercive enforcement mechanisms such as fines, as one of the most successful strategies used on projects to improve safety performance (Table 3).

The important attitudes for increasing safety performance and declining risk are to identify root causes of construction hazards and accidents, and manipulating proper precautionary tools and equipment related to the type of construction project and site condition (Charezehi and Ahankoob[6])(Table 3).
### Table 3 - Possible methods to improve construction site safety

| Possible methods to improve construction site safety | A | B | C | D | E | F | G |
|-----------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Safety equipment**                                |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Providing PPE to their workers always               |   |   |   |   |   |   | × |
| Creating safety regulations and policies            |   |   |   |   | × |   |   |
| Identifying Hazards                                 |   | × |   |   |   |   |   |
| Asses and evaluate risk                             |   |   |   |   |   |   | × |
| Decide precautions                                   |   |   |   |   |   |   | × |
| Recording findings and updating in relation to the work condition |   |   |   |   |   |   | × |
| Plan out short and long term safety budgets to ensure the adequacy of safety implementation on site | × |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Safety on site should be discussed at management meetings |   | × |   |   |   |   |   |
| Implementation of total safety management at the organisational level in construction companies |   |   | × |   |   |   |   |
| Using coercive enforcement mechanisms such as fines |   |   |   |   |   |   | × |
| **Workers attitudes on Safety**                     |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Construction workers must identify unsafe conditions and behaviors and try to correct them |   |   |   |   |   | × | × |
| Increasing in workers awareness of risk factors will be useful to increase the productivity and reduce the risk associated with construction activities |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Incentive programs should be developed              |   | × |   |   |   |   |   |
| Ensure that a very new employee on project site is given an appropriate orientation regarding safety and safety inspections |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| **Safety training**                                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Conduct weekly safety inspection                    |   |   |   |   |   | × |   |
| Conduct weekly formal safety meetings at the project level |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| **Other**                                           |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Reduce labour turnover rates to less than 25%       |   |   |   |   |   |   | × |

A. El-Mashaleh et al [9] Jordan, B. Charezehi and Ahankoob [6] Malaysia, C. Mahalingam and Raymond [16] India, D. Chia-Kung Lee and Jaafar [23] China, E. Belel and Muhmud [5] Nigeria, F. Agwa et al [2] Nigeria, G. Vitharana et al [30] Sri Lanka

They have introduced a continuous safety development process that includes six steps: creating safety regulations, identify hazard, assess and evaluate risk, decide precaution, record findings and updating in relation to the work condition. Safety inspection is the most important factor that influences safety performance on sites (Chia-Kung Lee and Jaafar, [23]). Safety on site should be discussed at management meetings and safety recognition and incentive programs should be developed (Belel and Muhmud [5]). However, Chen et al, [8] have identified public works managers and design and audit managers have lower level of perceived safety than contractor managers do (Chen et al, [8])(Table 3). Reinforcing the perception of safety between these two types of construction personnel is important to reduce construction accidents (Chen et al, [8]).

It is utmost important to ensure that a very new employee on project site is given an appropriate orientation regarding safety and safety inspections (Belel and Muhmud [5]). It is the responsibility of every construction worker to identify unsafe conditions and behaviors and try to correct them too (Belel and Muhmud [5]).

### 4. Discussion

By comparing health hazards, in different studies, it can be seen that health hazards having acute effects such as workers fall from height, have been reported more frequently...
It appears that noise and vibrations are risk factors which are having chronic effects on the health of workers, but the workers are not much aware of them (Table 1). However, construction workers are exposed to a combination of noise and vibration, which are inevitable in construction sites. Exposure levels of construction workers to noise and vibration are generally high. Negative effects of noise and vibration on construction workers have been reported in previous studies. However, noise and vibration have been identified as construction hazards by 11% and 3% of workers, respectively (Pendlebury et al [17]).

Depending on the type of construction sites, workers may get exposed to noise induced by one or more sources. It addition, it was found that type and size of the work sites are important factors in noise level: large sites, generally, have high exposure levels (Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences, [34]). Nevertheless, Hassan et al [10] reveal that large projects show a high and consistent level in safety while small projects show a low and varied safety levels. The report (Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences, [35]), mentioned that repeated exposure to noise levels about 85 dBA (such as years of working around construction noise without hearing protection) or exposing above 140 dBA for a short time period, such as 1 second, can damage nerves in the inner ear, resulting in permanent and in reversible hearing loss. Construction workers in Washington states are five times more likely to request workers’ compensation claims for hearing loss than workers in all occupations (Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences [35]).

Vibration induced from construction machines may affect on major part of the worker’s body or only a particular organ to vibrate. In Whole Body Vibration (WBV), energy enters the body through a seat or the floor; it affects the entire body or a number of organs in the body (Griffin [1]). The symptoms of WBV are not so readily recognizable and are often mistaken for other unrelated conditions. These results in hyperventilation, increased heart rate, oxygen intake, pulmonary ventilation and respiratory rate.

Causes of poor safety in construction sites have often been determined (Table 2). Improving of knowledge of construction personnel’s safety
cognition might be important in improving safety performance. Mostly identified poor safety practices are categorized under Safety equipment (Table2). To develop the knowledge on Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and risk factors in construction sites, awareness campaigns, through many methods like “on site safety charts, displaying pictures, posters or films”, can be used. In addition, practical demonstrations on site, arrangement of appropriate forms of formal or informal education and training programs for the workers on the site can be recommended, although the workers’ participation in such programs would be totally dependent on their interest. Incentives on completion of such trainings would be a good process to enhance workers’ interest. It would be better to introduce a system to evaluate the attitude towards safety implementation plan of project construction firms before giving them a contract. Contractors’ top management should formulate strategies and develop policies to create a safe culture as a catalyst for maintaining a safe project, while considering construction needs to be completed within the given period at a given cost. Designing for safety has also been identified as viable and needed intervention to improve safety performances.

Highly recommended possible methods of construction safety are related to safety management (Table 3). Annual safety audit programs can be suggested, possibly, conducted by relevant authority, to ensure safety practices in construction sites. The scope of the audits may include the safety management system of the construction firms, labour protection measures, safety pitfalls in construction sites. Appointing full time safety officers would also be a good approach to establish safety practices among construction workers, although it is not the usual practice in construction sites in most developing countries. However, in China, in construction sites having 50 workers or more, main contractor has to nominate a full-time safety inspector; for sites with an area exceeding 10,000 m² there must be 2-3 safety inspectors; wherever the site exceeds 50,000 m², the main contractor has to establish a safety management team. In addition, to improve safety, engineers, architects and technical officers should be exposed to construction site safety as a part of their educational programs in a university or a technical college. Conducting workshops in safety practices for workers in construction sites will help to make them aware about safety practices associated with their activities. In addition, contractors may look into possible methods to reduce hazardous exposure, in their sites leading to both acute and chronic health diseases.

Most of the previous studies were based on survey among professionals or statistical data collected from authorities, while few studies were based on interviews and questionnaire surveys. However, it will be better to visit construction sites and get views of range of workers (i.e., skilled workers, semi skilled workers and unskilled workers) in order to find effective methods to improve site safety and to reduce risk. A comprehensive research study based on face-to-face interviews and questionnaire surveys among construction workers is required, to understand whether skilled, semi skilled and unskilled workers have an idea about risk factors and safety practices.

5. Conclusions

This review attempts to identify health hazards, risks and causes of poor safety practices in construction sites. In addition, the differences in safety practices in both developed and developing countries and methods to improve construction site safety are discussed.

Health hazards in construction sites can be categorised into two: acute health hazards and chronic health hazards. Mostly reported acute health hazards are “workers fall from height” and “electric shocks”, while mostly reported chronic health hazard is “exposure to hazardous substances”. Lack of awareness about site safety or dislike to wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was identified as one of the main causes for scarcity of safety practices in construction sites. Other causes of poor safety practices include “Lack of productivity after lunch”, "lack of training facilities", "lack of effective labour training (possibly due to the transient nature of the construction work force),"lack of understanding of the job”, “unsafe behaviour found at industry (working with moving machinery, wearing dangling clothes, unsafe lifting, carrying and placing), “financial difficulties” and “influence of alcohol and drugs”. Workers’ and contractors’ awareness on possible risk factors and site safety were
more concentrated in studies in developed countries compared with developing countries.

There is no systematic study on the chronic effects of health hazards on construction workers, although possible risks were reported in some studies, implying that less attention has been paid for chronic health effects of workers. Noise and vibration associated with construction activities may have chronic effects on the health of workers.

To enhance safety practices, one of the major needs in the construction industry is to enhance professionals’ interests in active safety management and implementation of awareness programs, which must be developed and implemented among construction workers. An additional training for the workers, which could be provided by contractors about equipment they use, before workers engage in their duty, would also help to prevent accidents. Awareness on possible risk factors and knowledge on how to reduce these risk factors among workers and contractors will enhance site safety.

Acknowledgement

The authors wish to express their special thanks to Transforming University of Ruhuna into International Status (TURIS) project (grant no (RU/DVC/Pro 142) for providing necessary funds to carry out this research work.

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