The Meaning of Social Security Among Workers in the Construction Industry

Exploration of workers' perspectives on employment formalization
This document has been prepared, designed, laid out and printed within the framework of the Participatory Laboratory for the Formalization of Employment, led by the Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security (MTESS) and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The International Labor Organization (ILO) also contributed to this project. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations, including UNDP, or any UN Member States. This document is not for profit, therefore, it cannot be commercialized in Paraguay or abroad. Reproduction and dissemination by any means of the contents of this material is authorized, provided that the source is acknowledged.

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1. Introducción

Almost everywhere in the world the construction sector is characterized by a high rate of informality. The labor of construction workers in particular is very often carried out beyond the purview of state registries and regulation. In general, the absence of written contracts, legal protections, and access to social security indicates a high degree of vulnerability. However, in the case of the construction sector, this is compounded by factors such as the high seasonality and turnover of workers’ employment and the high risk of occupational accidents and illness. Moreover, in many countries, this activity tends to employ groups affected by other social or legal limitations in the exercise of their rights, such as undocumented migrants, ethnic minority groups and populations with low levels of formal education. This pattern of informality is observed across the world, regardless of the institutional, political, and economic factors that vary across countries, including the level of economic development.

In Paraguay, construction workers are one of the occupational groups with the highest rates of labor informality. The weak enforcement of labor rights within this sector is evidenced by official statistics: of the 198,381 construction workers in positions of dependent employment in 2019, only 8.6% are insured by the Instituto de Previsión Social (Social Security Institute—IPS) or contribute to another retirement fund. In addition, more than 85% of these workers did not have written labor agreements, 88% did not have access to any type of health insurance (compared to the overall figure of 65% for all workers) and only 6% reported having had vacation time during that year.¹ The vulnerability of this group of workers appears to be the product of a tangle of productive, economic, social, legal, and labor relations that are highly resistant to change and, in particular, to formalization.

This study argues that the central knot that generates this resistance and structures relations in the sector is the informal regulation of construction workers’ activities, understood as the social norms and informal practices that govern the behavior of employers and employees. Given this premise, it is key to generate, based on workers’ own accounts, an understanding of their "conception of the world of work," and how it gives rise to their system of beliefs, values, and social norms. This, in turn, can shed light on how this affects their assessment of institutions such as social security.

In addition, the high level of masculinization of the sector (approximately 4% of jobs are held by women)² suggests that gender norms influence the informal regulation of the sector and consequently working conditions and levels of informality.

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¹ We have not identified data on union density in the sector. However, the level of employment informality suggests that it is low.
² The Permanent Household Survey, the most systematic source of data on the structure of employment in Paraguay, does not make it possible to estimate accurately the percentage of women employed in the sector, owing to insufficient sampling to disaggregate by sector and by sex.
In this context, the present research seeks to answer these questions:

What does informal employment mean for informal construction workers? What social and gender norms influence the low levels of formalization in this sector? And what alternative security strategies do informal workers deploy in lieu of social security?

The data for this article come from an action-research project run by the Participatory Employment Formalization (LabMTESS), a joint project of the United Nations Development Program and the Paraguayan Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security (MTESS).³

This research utilized qualitative-participatory methodologies to include a variety of actor voices from the construction value chain: real estate companies, real estate brokers, construction companies, and construction workers. Two semi-structured interviews, a focus group of 13 male construction workers, a "cultural probe" completed by the workers themselves,⁴ and two reflection workshops on the right to social security (attended by 28 male and 2 female construction workers), allowed us to observe and analyze how construction workers understand their labor relations, the hierarchies present in them and the value of social security. The cultural probe was a “diary” completed during two weeks by the participants using text and audio telephone messages. It utilized the metaphor of a “house” to collect information about the workers' understanding of their careers: the door’s house symbolized the entrance to the labor world; the pillars, the people who support the workers problems; the walls, the formalization barriers; and the window, represents the future career paths. The participants sent their daily comments on each symbolic element of the house.

This paper has four sections. The next section contextualizes employment informality and access to social insurance in the construction industry. It also elaborates a conceptual framework on informal regulation where we develop the meaning of informality from the perspective of construction workers. The third section discusses the social and gender norms that affect how workers value their access to social security. The fourth section describes the security strategies adopted by workers within their informal labor relations. Finally, the paper concludes with some brief recommendations.

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⁴ On cultural probes, see Gaver et al. (1999).
2. What does informal employment mean for informal construction workers?

Construction workers are the main workforce on a construction project. Their occupation draws on their experience in building, renovation, or maintenance of buildings, homes, and public or industrial structures. Their work is part of the construction value chain includes the construction of the foundations, assembly of the structure, and the installation of fixtures. As we will see below, workers occupy various roles within a hierarchy that goes from helper to foreman. In general, construction projects hire under temporary contracts and have high labor. In addition, subcontracting relationships are very common, as part of a complex network of outsourcing services that begin with the relationship between the real estate company and the construction company.

The findings in “Muros Informales: Diagnóstico del empleo informal en la cadena de la construcción del área metropolitana de Asunción (2021)” (“Informal Barriers: A Diagnostic of Informal Labor in the Construction Value Chain in the Metropolitan Areas of Asuncion”) provide a general characterization of informal workers in the construction sector.

Informal workers in the construction sector are blue-collar workers. Most of the workers who access informal work in this sector are young adults, bilingual, and without a high school education, but they do not belong to the most economically vulnerable groups. Statistics suggest that the majority hold verbal contracts. The majority do not have a guaranteed retirement fund, nor do they have health insurance. In general, they do not have paid vacation time. In addition, they do not remain in the same establishment for long periods of time, as the jobs are usually temporary. Finally, the average income of informal workers is much lower than the average income of formal workers. This true at the national level, as well in the more urban and developed regions of Asunción and the Department of Central.

In regulatory terms, the construction worker is considered a salaried worker, since he/she renders services in a relationship of dependency with a contractor and receives a salary in exchange for work. A series of legal provisions establishes construction workers’ rights to social security, along with all other workers that work as day laborers or on part- or full-time basis.

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6 Article 382° of the Law No.213/1993 "ESTABLISHING THE LABOR CODE" names as responsibility of the State to protect workers against risks of general character and especially those derived from work through a system of social insurances.
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The government of General Higinio Nicolás Morínigo, president of the Republic of Paraguay from 1940 to 1943, created the Institute for Social Provision (IPS) in 1943\(^7\), during the wave of modernization that swept through the Latin American region in those years. Its institutional structure borrowed many elements from the social security systems that emerged from the processes of industrialization, urbanization and modernization of European societies.\(^8\) One of the consequences of this institutional "mimesis" in Paraguay has been the low coverage of social security and other retirement funds (less than 35% of workers) in an economy whose labor market is dominated by small-scale agriculture and small- and medium-sized service enterprises, including small businesses and self-employed construction workers.\(^9\) As in other countries in the region, the persistent "dualism" of the Paraguayan labor market is driving a debate about the solvency of the social security system, the economic and bureaucratic costs of "formalizing" employment, and the need for institutional reforms.\(^10\)

In this context, the construction industry is one of the sectors with the highest levels of informal labor relations in the Paraguayan economy. According to the 2019 Permanent Household Survey, 87.3% of the 266,812 workers engaged in the construction sector are informal. Of this total, 74.4% corresponds to workers in a relationship of dependency (including both employees of informal companies as well as employees of formal companies that maintain informal labor relations), 13.55% are as employers, and 12.10% are self-employed. The criterion for defining formality varies for each group: for dependent workers, social security contributions are considered as an indicator of formality; for employers and self-employed workers, the indicator is possession of a taxpayer ID number (RUC, Registro Único del Contribuyente).

On a personal level, construction workers perceive social security and other formal employment security as desirable but at the same time as very distant possibilities, far removed from their own experiences and labor trajectories. They associate formality and its benefits with "big companies" and with permanent or long-term employment contracts:

"If you're working in a big company, you know you're going to earn a little bit less than someone who is working independently, but you're going to have access to IPS" (Construction Worker Workshop Participant, September 24, 2020).

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Law No. 1860 ‘AMENDING DEGREE LAW No. 18071 OF FEBRUARY 18, 1943 CREATING THE SOCIAL Welfare INSTITUTE’.

"Article 1. rt. 1°. Fundamental Declarations. "Social Security shall cover, in accordance with the terms of the present Law, the risks of non-occupational illness, maternity, occupational accidents and occupational diseases, disability, old age and death of salaried workers of the Republic."

"Art. 2. Persons covered by the insurance scheme. It is compulsory to insure via the Institute any salaried worker who provides services or performs work under a written or verbal contract of employment, regardless of age or the amount of remuneration received, as well as apprentice workers who do not receive a salary."

\(^7\) Historical review : When was the Instituto de Previsión Social created? [https://portal.ips.gov.py/sistemas/ipsportal/contenido.php?sm=1](https://portal.ips.gov.py/sistemas/ipsportal/contenido.php?sm=1)


\(^9\) In 2019, of the total number of employed persons, 52% of people are employed in commercial and service activities, 20% in activities related to agriculture, livestock, hunting and fishing and the remaining 28% in industrial activities, construction, transport and finance. Only 23% of employed persons contribute to a retirement fund. Informality predominates in primary activities where 96% do not contribute to a pension fund, followed by the construction sector with 94% and commercial and service activities where 71% are excluded from access to contributory social benefits.

\(^10\) For a discussion of social security and the informal sector see ILO (2021).
The low social security coverage in the construction sector reflects the low incidence of State institutions in the regulation of the sector. This is also manifested by the limited and inaccurate information that construction workers have about the purposes, policies and procedures, and benefits of social insurance. For example, day laborers are generally unaware that, as dependent workers, they are covered by social security and a minimum salary, regardless of the duration of their employment.

In addition, the lack of accurate and official information leaves a gap in which the repetition of worker’s bad experiences and misinformation creates an echo chamber, generating distrust towards social security institutions and the State in general:

"We realize that (the sense of) insecurity has nothing to do with us, but rather it is someone else’s responsibility, in this case, those who run the country and, as we saw while we were talking during the exercise on equality, the value that they place on justice and laws is reflected in unsafe we feel." (2nd. Reflexive Workshop Participant, December 13, 2020).

At the same time, workers who identify existing legislation also point to the lack of enforcement or penalties for non-compliance and argue that this weakens credibility, legitimacy, and trust in the governing institutions.

"The role of government regulation in our country is very weak. Everything is legislated. There is a whole poetry of laws, but there is still a long way to go before they are implemented... So I think that one of the solutions to suggest is more direct intervention of the State to enforce compliance with social security and labor regulations, because everything is already stipulated (in the laws). But the problem is in the enforcement." (Construction Workers Workshop Participant, September 24, 2020).

Yet, to better understand the persistence of employment informality in the construction industry in Paraguay and in the world. It is essential to understand not only the incentives, costs, and benefits generated by the formal regulatory framework—the main object of many debates on possible reforms—but also its relationship with the lives of workers, their vision of working life, the security strategies they develop at work, and the practices that develop from the normative visions that emerge organically in the informal sector.
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2.1. The "informal regulation" of construction work

The fact that informal economic and labor relations prevail in the construction sector does not imply that the system of labor relations is free of rules. More precisely, informal employment means that formal rules arising from State institutions and public regulatory legal frameworks are not applied or are not complied with. The construction of State regulatory authority is a historical process, with the particularities of each national and historical context, that necessarily advances or not in relation with the authority of other social actors, such as the family, social groups, religion, business, the professions, academia, etc.\(^{11}\)

In general, both the hierarchy of authority among these groups and the content of the rules of social behavior are the subject of historical dispute. However, when the rules of social and economic behavior come to have a wider application in society and become persistent over time, they generate predictable or routinized behavior. The social sciences call these broadly accepted rules, "institutions." These rules can be formal, such as constitutions, laws, property rights, statutes and regulations, or they can be informal, such as customs, taboos, traditions, behavioral codes and social norms.\(^{12}\)

In economic activities where State institutions have a low application, such as the informal sector, "tradition" and "customs" play a preponderant role in establishing behavioral norms derived from the beliefs and values of the actors involved. Subsequently, these beliefs justify the rules that, de facto if not de jure, guide the interactions, exchanges, and conflicts among actors who often have significant power asymmetries. This dynamic finally leads to concrete productive and economic practices, including employment and job security strategies. From this perspective, we might say that neither workers nor the employers are themselves "informal." It is rather the rules that guide their interactions that are informal. Rather than a simple violation of the law, what we can observe is compliance with alternative rules established by or arising from extra-state authorities.\(^{13}\)

Thus, in order to understand the low compliance with a formal institution such as the workers' protection provided by social security, it is necessary to understand and analyze the functionality and durability of informal institutions and their relationship with formal institutions. The gap between the imperfect enforcement of formal institutions and the enduring force of informal institutions is also where the process of institutional change or evolution is most visible and amenable to the kind of analysis that can inform the design of institutional reforms.\(^{14}\)

With respect to construction workers specifically, Assad (1993) found that kinship relations, social norms linked to the traditional apprenticeship system, and informal interactions among construction workers in cafes exerted far more regulatory influence on the labor market for construction workers than did state regulations, formal job training programs, or workers' unions representing the sector in Egypt.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{14}\) For example, Casson et al (2010) argue that a development-oriented institutional perspective should "analyse the ways in which informal institutions (customs) gradually change the actions and interactions of actors in all types of social organizations (such as households, groups, villages, as well as businesses and governments). It has long been clear that the evolution of institutions is driven by such social institutions as gender, class, caste and social capital."

Similarly, our study indicates that "paternalism" and "working-class masculinity" constitute two informal institutions that consistently guide construction workers' actions, their interactions with their employers, and especially their choice of security strategies in their careers.

Paternalism refers to an economic institution observed in the governance of different economies in the process of industrialization and that establishes reciprocal and asymmetrical obligations between employers and employees: the obligation of the employer to provide resources and protection to his subordinates and the obligation of the workers to obey the patriarchal authority of their employers.16

Working-class masculinity refers to social norms that closely identify manhood with paid physical labor and assigns a series of practices and expectations to the economic and social role of working men in the workplace and at home.17 We observe in worker narratives two manifestations of these gender norms that we name "desired masculinity" and "probationary masculinity." The first refers to how the worker desires to look and be seen in relation to gender role norms. The second refers to how the workers' masculinity is tested through the observation and evaluation of their peers and superiors in the workplace.18

In summary, the hypothesis that emerges from the qualitative evidence gathered in this study from the construction sector is that these two norms undermine the awareness, valorization, and use of the social security system as a formal institution established for the protection of workers. The logic of the hypothesis is as follows:

1. Employment informality implies, in and of itself, a low institutional incidence in the regulation of construction work, specifically in workers' perception and recognition of risks throughout their career and in their awareness and valorization of institutional means of dealing with risks in working life.

2. In absence of formal institutional advocacy, workers' perception of risk, their awareness of rights, and their strategies for work safety derive from traditional social environment of the informal economy and from the personal relationships and values that operate within it.

3. In particular, working-class masculinity and paternalism influence the low value placed on social insurance, because these norms naturalize the different types of risks to which, legally, workers should not be exposed.

4. These norms are manifest in informal rules recognized by both employers and workers in the construction industry over the course of their career in the informal sector. Specifically, the concept of "derecho de piso," or "paying one's dues," defines the series of steps a worker must take to gain greater security and to become a contractor or foreman—the aspiration of many workers.

16 For example, Chou (2002) investigates how industrial paternalism evolves in the Taiwanese textile sector in relation to its insertion in the global economy. Alamany García (2005) defines paternalism as "the regime of relations between the employer and the worker that, assimilating them to family relations, attributes to the employer a kind of tutelary protection over his workers". For a basic conceptual discussion of industrial paternalism see Abercrombie, N., & Hill, S. (1976).

17 For example, Fuller (2000) analyses how male workers in Peru constitute and affirm their gender identities in the appropriation of work and how this evolves over the life cycle of men and in relation to women in the domestic sphere.

18 We develop these concepts based on Palermo and Salazar's (2016) study of the construction of masculinity in the extractive industries of Mexico and Argentina. The authors observe the same pattern among workers: the desire to express certain masculinities and the testing of their masculinity in work settings. For a broader conceptual discussion of masculinity and its hegemonic and subordinate forms see Connell and Messerschmidt (2005).
5. In this “informal environment”, workers prioritize informal and private security strategies, such as finding a "good employer" who will provide continuous employment and who will lend money or pay the costs of an accident, as a favor or a personal responsibility, while at the same time giving low priority to formal and institutional security strategies, such as social security contributions.

In the following sections, we will develop this argument and lay out the empirical evidence that supports it.
3. What social and gender norms influence the low levels of formalization in the construction sector?

A key finding of this study has been the identification of certain deep-rooted or institutionalized beliefs and practices in the sector that become barriers to access to social security, as they generate an alternative regulatory system that affects the decision of employers and employees to formalize.

3.1. Paternalism and "paying one’s dues"

Construction workers recognize and legitimize a hierarchy based on the "derecho de piso" as a form of entry and advance in the construction sector. The derecho de piso, as a rite of passage, socializes workers into paternalistic relationships and, as will be seen below, into "probationary masculinity" as a gender norm.

The entry of construction workers into working life involves an age-based "rite of passage" that marks, on the one hand, a new relationship between the young person and the household (he becomes a "provider") and, on the other hand, a new labor relationship (he becomes the "apprentice" of a "master"). This rite of passage is marked by an act in which the son is "entrusted" to a master, generally a family member of neighbor, for training in the construction worker's trade. This relationship creates a bond of loyalty, care, and teaching of values, in addition to training in the trade. This reinforces loyalties among family members or neighbors. At a very young age, workers' bodies are molded for the first tasks. Most children and adolescents begin with the loading of heavy materials during this initiation ritual.

"I started working, almost as a child. I started helping to carry bricks" (Participant S- 5. Cultural Probe, September 2020).

Age and experience are the basis of authority in the work hierarchy. However, the hierarchy also operates with the expectation of a paternalistic protective relationship between the master and his apprentices. The relationship is quite informal and usually is based on long-standing ties between the master and the apprentice's family. After a period of initial training, the apprentice begins to receive a salary that varies according to age. He occupies the position of assistant. This is the first step on the labor promotion among construction workers.

"I remember my first day was in a private home. I started working as a handyman with my uncle. The thing that motivated me to become a house painter is that the job was not tiring, it was very easy, and it was well paid. That's why I liked it and I worked for about 6 months as an assistant with my uncle and then I decided to look for another job on my own" (Participant S-3, Cultural Probe, September 2020).

19 Arnold van Gennep (1909), originally conceives of rites of passage as "the ways in which human beings signal transformation from one social status to the next."
Once you enter in the construction job, there are some traditional rules and norms that are transmitted from master to apprentice. These norms include discipline and loyalty to the master, willingness to tolerate disciplinary measures and to make great physical efforts for low pay. Consequently, the socialization process generates values that are function to an informal economic production system. In particular, a sense of paternalism fosters loyalty and respect under the male power figure who gives "lifelong education," transferring values about physical resistance, risk tolerance, and "paying one’s dues."

To reach the highest rung in the construction worker’s hierarchy is to become a site supervisor or foreman, a figure in charge of directing activities and personnel management, mainly among construction workers, but who also enjoys the ability to negotiate with the engineers and architects in charge of the project. This position is earned by dint of experience, but, above all, of having "paid one’s dues," which implies starting from the bottom as an assistant, a figure who literally "carries everything." The burden is both literal and symbolic, as the assistant receives a series of mandates to prove his or her worth as a worker.

When constructing personal work trajectories, construction workers describe the rite of paying their dues as a source of "experience" that allows them to gain knowledge and which translates into opportunities for upward mobility that can eventually lead them to work independently as a self-employed worker.

"My first job was being a helper in repairing refrigerators and installing air conditioners, and the motivation was to be able to acquire small skills at a young age as I was growing into different jobs as a light mechanical work" (Participant S-9, Cultural Probe, September 2020).

The practice of apprenticeship and working one’s way up from the bottom, regulate construction workers’ entrance to the labor market, displacing entrance into the sector by means of formal vocational training. Although, when interviewed, developers recognize the low degree of worker training as a problem in the sector, the formal road into the labor market exists in tension with the paternalistic system of paying one’s dues. The foreman derives his social capital from the recognition of apprentices, assistants, workers, and journeymen who all climbed the same ladder. There is a system of skills validation based on practical performance in the field. Thus, the entry of workers trained in vocational schools also must submit to this system, even if they have been trained with the use of new technologies or on occupational hazard management, which can include, among other things, the use of protective equipment and clothing.

3.2. Working-class masculinity: between desire and the test

We observed that one of the most important values transmitted to apprentices, which furthermore is critical to “paying one’s dues,” is the demonstration of masculinity at work. Studies on masculinity in the world of work focus their attention on how norms of masculinity mark labor and productive relationships. In the case of the construction sector, our aim is to observe how these norms affect perceptions of risk and safety. In this sense, the category

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20 Palermo and Salazar (2016), for example, observe how the configuration of social relations arising in the labor space, also consolidate a certain order of gender relations that keeps a logical relationship with forms of the productive process. Thus, a profile of the worker is formed, inseparable from certain models of "being man(s)" that is guaranteed and perpetuated by the very conditions of production (Palermo and Salazar, 2016).
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The image of the construction worker as a strong man, is paired to a "probationary masculinity," defended through concrete acts of "stamina" under the stresses of physically demanding work.

"As an assistant I made the [concrete] mixture and passed bricks and was in constant movement, in this work you put your physical ability to the test " (Participant S- 9, Cultural Probe, September 2020).

Companies appropriate the idea of "stamina," anchored in the concepts of desired and probationary masculinity. This is an appropriation, not only of the worker's productive time, but also of the worker's rest and self-care time. In that sense, this idea deepens the barriers to formalization, because it exalts a notion of "stamina" that in turn helps define the "good worker." In short, "good workers" are those who do not get sick, resist pain, and overcome accidents under the mandate of "probationary masculinity". Productivity is thus intensified by a social norm born of the stereotype of the "good worker" which makes no allowances for social insurance against risk or illness.

Masculinity is embodied in the form of scars, blisters, hardened hands, or in some cases, mutilations, that mold and mark the body of construction workers. These traits are normalized under the ideal of masculinity tethered to the mandate of "stamina," which makes upward labor mobility possible:

"My pillars were my grandparents. Thanks to them I continued working. A year after working in carpentry I had an accident - I cut three fingers and it prevented me from working for 22 days. The salary was very low and I told my grandfather that I did not want to continue because the money was so little - and on top of that I had an accident. They encouraged and motivated me saying that these were things that happen and that one day I would be able to take advantage of the experience and set up my own workshop with my machines and work on my own" (Participant S- 7. Cultural Probe, September 2020).

"The idea of stamina" refers to bodies (sometimes directly, sometimes symbolically and indirectly), reinforcing a biological concept of gender as the basis for labor segregation based on the divergent anatomies and physiologies of male and female bodies, and deemphasizing a concept of masculinity as a social construction that sustains a system of social and productive relations.

3.3. "Accidents happen": normalization of accidents and risk in the workplace

Accounts by workers who participated in the study demonstrate a normalization of occupational risk and in particular of accidents. The paternalistic relationships that enable promotion and career advancement in the sector, the lack of social and family relationships needed to access employment and experience outside the sector, and the gender norms of stoicism and physical "stamina" encourage workers to accept precarious conditions as a condition of their employment. In other words, the logics of "paying one's dues" and probationary masculinity make risks and accidents a necessary test for remaining and moving up within the sector.
"I realized that it is not for everyone, it takes too much effort and with everything you do you are exposed to many things, but in itself, it made me understand that it is a field that should be admired and valued because it is so hard on human beings. For me, the experience of entering the world of construction is like: the strongest survives" (Participant S-10, Cultural Probe, September 2020).

"I've had several little accidents: my ladder broke and I fell, I cut my finger with the handsaw, and other little things" (Participant S-6, Cultural Probe, September 2020).

The IPS recognizes work accidents as "any organic injury that the worker suffers in the process of or as a consequence of the work that he/she performs for his/her employer and during the time that he/she performs it or should be performing it. Said injury must be produced by an externally caused sudden and violent action, during work hours or on the way to and from work on public roads". Accidents that meet this definition are covered by IPS benefits.

However, construction workers do not perceive the frequency of workplace accidents in the sector as a reason for accessing IPS coverage. They assume that, in the event of an accident, the employer will cover the costs and that putting up with these risks is an inherent part of one's early career before eventually becoming a foreman. The recurrence of workplace accidents only reinforces the normalization of risk in the construction sector and the importance of a "good boss" and the need to "pay one's dues" as a means of achieving greater protection from accidents.

In addition, accidents are not perceived as potentially disabling; they appear to be understood as isolated events that will be overcome. This vision is reinforced and normalized by family members. They are seen as "tests" or "occupational hazards" that are overcome in order to climb up the workplace hierarchy. A perception of real risk, and the need for protection, is only accorded to extremely dangerous tasks. It is in these cases that both the employer and the employee value being registered with the IPS.

"I have IPS because I work high up, there we have it" (Participant Reflective Workshop 1, Experimentation Phase, December 2, 2020).

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22 Globally, approximately one in six reported fatal accidents occurs in the construction sector, which translates into a total of 60,000 fatal accidents per year. See: ILO (2015) Good practices and challenges in promoting decent work in construction and infrastructure projects issues paper for discussion at the Global Dialogue Forum on Good Practices and Challenges in Promoting Decent Work in Construction and Infrastructure Projects (Geneva, 19-20 November 2015), Sectoral Policy Department, International Labour Office, Geneva.
In contrast, chronic diseases that degrade the body due to constant exposure to physical effort, dust, sun, etc. are not perceived as occupational hazards. As such, preventative healthcare and periodic medical check-ups are undervalued. Workers see medical appointments as a "waste of time", which imply losing a working day. This situation shows the lack of attention to preventive health care on the part of both the employee and the employer. Cases of bad experiences taking leave and accessing IPS services are held up as examples:

"The truth is that I had no serious accident. What I had were respiratory problems due to the chemicals used in the works and the dust. There are times when the company doesn’t even give you the right protection, the mask and things like that. I've never had any serious accidents at work. I only had to go to the IPS twice for respiratory problems, and I was not treated (...) it is a waste of time" (Participant S-10, Cultural Probe, September 2020).
4. What security strategies do workers incorporate based on their informal work context?

The values and relationships that govern informal work are the starting point for construction workers’ search for economic and employment security. In other words, security is built individually based on a network of loyalties, reciprocities, and favors and the paternalism based on traditional social relations that emerge in the work environment and the production process.

4.1. The "good boss": protective paternalism

The notion of the "good boss" is undergirded by the practice of apprenticeship and the norm of “paying one’s dues” to climb the workplace ladder, especially to the position of foreman. This paternalistic schema underwrites the belief that work accidents will be covered by the "good boss" who, in the worker’s imaginary, prefers to assume the costs rather than allow the employer to "deduct" his social security payment from his salary.

"And most of the time when there is an accident on the construction sites, if we don’t have IPS, the employer takes full responsibility" (Participant S-2, Cultural Probe, September 2020).

The “good boss” also assumes the costs of material lost during a job, generating small loyalties with the apprentice and forging a system of reciprocity and respect shaped by paternalism.

"Once I was painting the wall with the ceramic color and the wall was painted with lime, and when I was painting it burned all the paint (...) and when there is a mistake like that, the foreman takes responsibility" (Participant S-4, Sonda Cultural, September 2020).

Contractors have their own trusted network. In rare cases, in the opening steps of the outsourcing process, bidding opens up the possibility of establishing relationships with new companies. But outsourcing networks based on experience and proven relationships are durable. In this sense, foremen tend to generate a network of "trusted employees" with whom they maintain stable relationships, making formalization possible at least in theory.

Yet, paternalistic relationships, while providing a measure of protection for workers, also curtail workers’ ability to object to the discipline and precarious working conditions imposed as part of "paying one’s dues" or to seek better opportunities and working conditions with other employers. This reality in turn fuels the search for greater autonomy and independence by ascending to the rank of self-employed contractor.
4.2. Upward mobility and the desire for self-employment

As mentioned above, the highest rung of the job ladder is the position of foreman. This actor is in a position of command or often form his own crew of workers. The ultimate aspiration is to become a self-employed worker, a status with independence and autonomy. Upon reaching this rung, a worker can confidently provide for his own health and retirement needs. In other words, the most common strategy adopted by construction workers in the pursuit of economic security is to try to escape dependent employment and become an employer of other informal workers. In practice, few are able to achieve this aspiration, but those who do succeed reproduce the cycle of informal employment and social and gender norms.

"If I find a job, then I push the boys to go and do that particular job. I can't hire them and pay IPS for them because, first, I have to be qualified as a micro-entrepreneur, and I'm not because I do that job every once in a while, because one month I do electrical work and another month I sell strawberries, so it's not permanent. So I hire people and we finish the job and we don't see each other again until another job. That is the function of the contractor" Participant Reflective Workshop 1, Experimentation Phase, December 2, 2020).

For construction workers, making the step from being a master builder or foreman to a self-employed worker provides the independence of having a future-looking project, in which, as a contractor, they will no longer have to perform heavy tasks directly, but will rather direct a crew of workers to do those tasks, and in which they earn a higher income without the pressure of the hierarchy.

In the construction worker's world view, being self-employed becomes an ideal goal that solves their problems. However, this situation demonstrates the underlying vulnerability and risks that come with not having a formal support system as an independent worker. Moreover, in the limited network of contractors involved in a construction site, self-employment finally reproduces informality and the existing chain of command under the ideology of the entrepreneur. The unpredictability of contracts and income, finally, limits the self-employed worker's capacity for his own (voluntary) contribution to social security and for the registration of his work team.

4.3. The Family: Domestic Loyalties as Security Strategies

In the workshops conducted with construction workers, they expressed the importance of the family to their understanding and realization of personal security.

"What makes me feel safe is my family, that my whole family is well in my house, that everything is fine, that no one lacks anything, and that I don't need work to give my family security. (Participant in Reflective Workshop 2, Experimentation Phase, December 13, 2020).

"In my particular case, what makes me feel safe is my fiancée, because I know that when I fall she is going to be there when I fall." (Participant Reflective Workshop 2, Experiential Phase, December 13, 2020).
The Meaning of Social Security Among Workers in the Construction Industry

For these workers, family support provides an entry point into the world of work on the one hand, and supporting one's family is the point of working, on the other.

"Those who give me strength are my family, they helped me to buy the first tools for welding, for electrical work. My family are the only ones that support me" (Participant Reflective Workshop 2, Experimentation Phase, December 13, 2020).

"If it wasn't for my faith and my partner I wouldn't have come out of that battle triumphant, because being left without a job from one day to the next with bills and having to support a partner, a family, I think it's the saddest thing that can happen to a person" (Participant Reflective Workshop 2, Experimentation Phase, December 13, 2020).

Within their belief system, workers feel that their role is to be the "family provider," as the source of economic and material security for their dependents. At the same time, they feel dependent on the material support and care of their families in times of illness, accident, unemployment, and vulnerability that they face as part of their work trajectory.

From workers' comments, it can be surmised that the family functions as an economic-social unit to 1) bequeath and teach the construction trade, 2) contribute to or subsidize increased worker productivity through the purchase of new tools, 3) leverage contacts to access new jobs, 4) cover emergency expenses that could be covered by social security and 5) absorb the emotional discharge frustrations generated in informal work environments.

A conception of security that is so centered on the informal domestic sphere is underpinned by relationships of loyalty and reciprocity in which the male role of "provider" generates a debt to be paid, typically by women, with supportive relationships and care practices in times of need and illness. At the same time, it is clear that, in many cases, women's unpaid work in the domestic sphere represents a fundamental pillar for sustaining informal work in the construction sector. It is this work, in the form of care in the event of accidents, care for the family while workers are at work, and women's supplementary paid work when men face unemployment, that allows construction workers and their households to absorb the risks to which informal construction work exposes them.

An informal security strategy conceived as an exchange of favors and care between family members not only excludes more institutional concepts and strategies for social security, specifically social security as a workers' right, but may also contribute to the invisibility of women's economic contribution to both productive and reproductive work.23

23 This point merits further investigation of how security concepts and practices in informal worker households may manifest "ambivalent sexism," reinforcing systems of patriarchal domination. The theory of ambivalent sexism proposes the simultaneous coexistence of two types of sexism: hostile and benevolent. Hostile sexism attempts to justify male power through the defense of traditional gender roles, the view of women as sexual objects, and a derogatory characterization of women. Benevolent sexism proposes a romantic vision of women, which grants them affective and altruistic qualities that men do not possess, and attributes to them a natural weakness, in the face of which men must function as protectors. Both hostile and benevolent sexism promote the defense of traditional gender roles in defense of patriarchal social structures (Glick and Fiske, 1996, 1997).
5. Discussion: the poor valuation of social security in informal labor regulation

We have seen how informal workers' search for personal and occupational security is highly structured, not by the formal rules of the social security system and labor law, but by the social and informal norms dominant in their work, community and domestic environments. It is usually the contractors or the employees themselves who, under a paternalistic logic, bear the costs that ensure their protection against risks, while simultaneously imposing conditions of loyalty and precariousness linked to the process of “paying one's dues.”

In particular, the workers' accounts highlight not only the normalization of the risk of accidents, but also of the lack of protection against lost income due to accident or illness. Effectively, this means that the protection of a "good boss"—which consists of providing continuous work and covering emergency medical expenses—is rarely achieved and provides fewer benefits than social security.

This reciprocal dynamic is further reinforced by the poor information workers receive about their rights and social security policies and procedures.

For example, this lack of information leads to highly varied ideas about the rate of withholdings for social security. Some workers mention withholdings of 25%, while others argue that it can be as high as 50%. Many workers receive their net salary without being informed of any possible withholdings.

Over the course of the workshops with construction workers, we also observed that their knowledge regarding IPS coverage and the rights of contributors is limited to health care services, particularly with regard to coverage for accidents and emergency care. Knowledge about benefits for disabilities and disability pensions is lacking.

Poor or insufficient information about social insurance has two consequences. First, it leads to an inflated assessment of private insurance options, even when they offer limited coverage, because workers value prompt attention. This was the case of one participant who recounted his experience as an employee of a construction company that provided him with private insurance. His experience was positive in terms of receiving emergency care, follow-up by a specialist doctor, coverage for medicines, and a one-week of sick leave. However, what this worker did not know is that private insurances do not cover paid sick leave, while the IPS does.

Second, the lack of accurate information regarding social security contributes to workers' understanding of social security as a product (which can be consumed, or not, as circumstance warrants), rather than as a basic right for all workers to which the solidarity principle dictates they must contribute. Thus, they consider that the services offered by social security are not of high quality compared to private services. This engenders ideas of "choice" about the services they want to opt for. In other words, "workers want accident insurance" with full coverage but do not want to pay for medical services and retirement. Without an understanding of the social security system as a whole, which provides security at different stages in workers' lives and coverage for the family nucleus, individual and private security strategies take precedence over collective or social and public strategies, to the detriment of a rights-based social security regime.
They take a lot of money from you, 25% of your salary, for the IPS service, and they don't attend to you. They tell you that they are going to give you an appointment and if you are about to die, they can't. For the service they provide, it is a lot” (Reflective Workshop Participant 1, Experimentation Phase, December 2020). For the service they provide, it is a lot” (Participant in Reflective Workshop 1, Experimentation Phase, December 2, 2020).

However, the notions of security generated by informal employment do not completely exclude the public and the social. On the contrary, in a reflection exercise that asked workers to narrow down the meanings of the words "solidarity" and "equity", they placed the first word in a mostly domestic plane and linked it to family or neighborhood-level reciprocity. They linked equity to the role of the government as the guarantor of the fulfillment of rights and to transparency in its the use of IPS contributions. Thus, while solidarity is located in the domestic sphere, equity is located in the public sphere. This is what workers expect from the governing institutional framework.

"If you want to be safe, you have to buy your harness, your boots, here the social policies and industrial safety, which is stipulated in our code, are not complied with. In the construction sector, there is a lack of an entity that requires construction companies, engineers, and architects to provide insurance for their personnel, to provide them with IPS” (Participant Reflective Workshop 1, Experimentation Phase, December 2, 2020).
6. Conclusions

We have seen how poor regulation of the construction labor market by formal institutions can lead to informal strategies for addressing the lack of access to social security. Specifically, the norm of "paying one's dues" generates in workers the aspiration for upwards mobility while perpetuating the cycle of informal employment. Likewise, the idea of "the good boss" encapsulates paternalistic norms and behaviors that function as a protection strategy and which incentivizes the drive to self-employment as a security strategy while reproducing systems of informal labor and limiting workers' awareness and exercise of their rights. At the same time, we find that workers' informal job security practices are underpinned by gender norms that expose workers to physical risks and potentially perpetuate unequal gender relations in their households. Finally, the lack of a rights perspective and accurate information about social security leads workers to value the private over the public, and individualism over solidarity, thus weakening the values on which social security rests as an institution and alienating workers from their rights.

In response to these observations, we summarize five possible complementary strategies to break the cycle of informal employment in the construction industry:

1. Measures that promote the dissemination of accurate information about social security policies, procedures, and benefits. Accurate information about the costs and benefits of social security, compared to the benefits of informal protection currently sought by workers, could encourage greater worker participation.

2. Measures to generate reflection on social security entitlements and the relevance of social security for workers and their families. The more information is likely to be insufficient to bring about behavioral change in many cases. Raising awareness of social security rights requires, in addition to accurate information, interventions that help workers reconsider the costs and benefits of the security strategies they currently practice and enable them to seek formal employment and claim their social security rights as alternatives.

3. Technical and entrepreneurial training and certification programs as an alternative to the informal norm of “paying one’s dues.” Training programs may increase worker productivity and the efficiency of developers’ planning and cost management, particularly in conditions of high demand and unpredictability. Increased agility and productivity may increase the ability of firms to generate better jobs and contribute to social security. But its most important effect may be to dislodge the system of "paying one’s dues" as the only route to promotion and job security in the construction sector.

4. Integrate a gender perspective into these interventions. The informal job and family security strategies prevalent in the sector are established or based on gender norms. Generating a sense of entitlement to social security rights and its benefits requires conveying not only that they are available to workers and employers, but also that they represent forms of security that can help workers overcome the pressures and limitations they feel in their domestic and professional gender roles.

Further empirical research is needed, but interventions targeting construction workers households and families could be very powerful. Interventions could be developed, for example, to highlight how social security benefits can replace or complement the care work and household economic security role often assumed by women, allowing them...
to enter the labor market on a more permanent and more advantageous basis, and contributing to stronger overall household economic security. This would promote greater social protection and, at the same time, greater gender equality in vulnerable households.

5. Focus the proposed interventions on the small- and medium-sized enterprises that generate the majority of employment in the sector and which are sites for the reproduction of the informal systems of “paying one’s dues”, paternalism, and the gender norms that currently regulate the sector.
Bibliography


