



WOMEN IN THE UNORGANISED SECTOR IN INDIA

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Abstract:

A women's role can be appropriately described as 'multi-dimensional'. A women has to be a daughter, a wife, a mother, and a professional at the same time. Today, women's importance is gaining speed in the world of work. But, the inappropriate notion about women which says that 'women are ruled by heart, not head,' restricts the women to be credited for their contribution towards the economic success. In India, although the absolute numbers are lower, a slightly higher percentage of women workers are in informal employment as compared to men. In India, women are almost always involved in some kind of productive and/or reproductive activity, but much of their work is invisible, and they are largely employed in low skilled, low paid informal work with little or no social security—for instance, as domestic workers or self-employed home-based workers.

Keyword: women workers, census, problem, unorganized sector, conclusion

Women constitute nearly a third of the workforce in India. In 2011, out of a total workforce of 481.7 million, 149.9 million or 31 per cent are women. The present study of women workers is based on analysis of Census data. It describes the variations in work participation rate of men and women by States and regions and the distribution of workers among the principal occupational categories. The macro overview of occupational structure of female work participation shows that a larger share of women workers is still in primary sector in India. Women's employment is much more concentrated in agriculture than men's; nearly 65 per cent of employed women work in agriculture compared to 50 per cent of employed men. A multiple linear regression model is used to identify the factors determining women's participation in different types of economic activities, i.e., female literacy rate, per capita income, sex ratio and female work participation rate. A correlation matrix is also calculated to find out the relation between female WPR and female literacy rate, per capita income, sex ratio. The results reveal that sex ratio is positively related while per capita income and female literacy rate are negatively related to female WPR.

It may be because of majority of women moving into the labour force during crisis or distress and withdraw when economic conditions of the household are better.

The term “Informal sector” refers to economic activities i.e., production and distribution of goods and services by the operating units of the households which essentially differ from the formal sector in terms of technology, economies of scale, use of labour-intensive processes, and virtual absence of well maintained accounts. It embraces a widely dispersed multitude of operating units with high rates of birth and death and considerable mobility. It is informal in the sense that they are not regulated by government under any statute. The 1993 definition of the informal sector adopted by ICLS (International Conference of Labour Statisticians) includes only one category of informal wage workers i.e. employees of informal enterprises. Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), in fact, recommended an employment base definition of the informal sector that would include all non-standard wage workers who work without minimum wages, assured work or benefits.

According to the Census of India 1991 “Work is defined as participation in any economically productive activity. Such participation may be physical or mental in nature. Work involves not only actual work but also effective supervision and direction of work. It also includes unpaid work on firm or in family enterprise”. Let us have a brief idea on the concept of “worker” as used in the Census of India over the years and the changes this concept has undergone. The data on the economic activity of the people collected upto 1951 census were based on income and the dependency concepts. Persons whose ‘work’ produced economic returns were considered workers and the rest were considered the ‘dependents’. As a result a large number of women were included in the category of dependents since their activities were not evaluated in economic terms. The classification of population as “workers” and “non workers” based on the concept of work was introduced in 1961 census. In the case of seasonal work, a person was considered as a ‘worker’ if he/she had some regular work more than one hour a day throughout the greater part of the ‘working season’. In the case of regular employment in any trade, profession, service, business or commerce the basis of work was satisfied if the person was employed during any of the 15 days preceding the day on which the enumerator had visited the household. In the 1971 census, however, population was divided into two broad streams of main activity as “workers” and “nonworkers”. The reference period adjusted was one week prior to the date of enumeration in case of regular work in trade, profession and business.

The 1971 census registered a sharp decline in the work participation rate as compared to 1961 census. The economic questions of the 1981 census were reformulated so as to first divide the population into those who had worked anytime at all during the year proceeding the Census and those who had not worked at all during the year. The latter were termed as non-workers. Having classified the population into these broad groups an attempt was made to subdivide those who had worked anytime into two groups: (1) main workers i.e. those who had worked in some economic activity for the major parts of the year (183 days or more) and (ii) marginal workers i.e., those who had worked less than 183 days during the last year. Thus, mutually exclusive groups of “main”, “marginal” and “non” workers have been introduced since the 1981 census.

According to National Sample Survey (1999-2000) 92.4% of the total workforce in India is employed in the unorganised sector. So far as the women’s employment in this sector is concerned they constitute over 82.6% of the total female work force of the country. In India only 18.1% of the female work force is employed in the organised sector and the remaining 81.9% is employed in the unorganised sector. Even in the urban areas almost 80% of the women workers are employed in the unorganised sectors like household industries, petty trades, services, buildings and construction activities. In the rural areas women predominantly work in agricultural sectors which are essentially unorganised in nature. Women’s work participation in this sector is widely conditioned by several cultural considerations, localised norms, values and traditions which together form the

basis of gender construction. The sexual divisions of labour within family, caste, and ethnicity based division of labour also condition the form and extent of women's work participation in the unorganised sector in general and in agriculture in particular.

Home Workers: The home worker or home-based worker falls within a grey area, in a category between employed workers and self-employed workers. There is no system to enforce minimum wages because of the informal contractual relationship between the worker and the employer, the employer's agent or the contractor.

Domestic Workers: We have now to refer to a category of workers who may well be one of the most numerous categories of workers in our country. These are the domestic workers whom we find in the urban areas as well as rural areas. There is no reliable estimate of the number of persons who are engaged in domestic service. They are somewhat visible in the urban areas, and it may be possible to make some estimate of their numbers in the towns and cities of our country. But, it can perhaps be said without fear of contradiction, that a large majority, perhaps a predominant majority of those engaged in this category of service are women and children. An estimate made by the College of Social Work in Bombay claims that 80% of domestic workers are women.

It is well known that many persons, who are employed in domestic work, are people who have migrated to the urban areas in search of employment. It is believed that domestic service does not need any special skill. Perhaps those who seek such service are also under the impression that they will be protected in the household, and will receive the kind of treatment that can be expected from the members of a respectable family. There are many instances which show that they are extremely poor, illiterate, that they come from rural areas and have no acquaintance with the ways of the town and townspeople.

They have to eke out their existence and therefore, often agree to work at nominal wages, taking the risks of uncertainty and uncivil or inhuman conditions of work and treatment. The existing laws do not provide them the protection they need. It is well known that there is no system of social security on which they can fall back. In general, the circumstances are such that domestic workers have a very hard life. They have to work many hours, rising much before their employers do, doing a variety of work, and sometimes making do with very few hours of undisturbed sleep. There are no fixed hours of work. They have to be at the beck and call of their employer. In many cases, they are not provided with adequate food. In some cases, they have to be satisfied with the leftovers of the employers. They do not earn enough to buy adequate clothing, and in some cases clothing that will protect them from the rigours of the climate. Again, in many cases, they are not provided with a safe and clean place where they can rest and sleep. It must be pointed out that since most of the domestic servants are women and children, they run the risk of sexual harassment and exploitation in some houses. It is therefore, very clear to us that domestic servants must be provided at least a modicum of protection and satisfactory safeguards for security.

A Non-Governmental group has formulated a Bill that incorporates provisions for protection and safety of domestic workers. They wanted that any such law must provide for the benefits of provident fund, Gratuity, medical needs, security. The promoters of the Bill asked for the following:

- a) The domestic worker should be recognized as a worker, and issued an Identity Card or/and letter of appointment.
- b) Working hours for domestic workers should be fixed at 8 hours a day.
- c) They should be paid overtime allowances in case they have to work longer.
- d) They must be entitled to some personal free time during the day.
- e) They must be entitled to a night's rest.

Sex Workers are another area which needs attention. We do not have any reliable estimates of the number of women who fall in the category of sex workers or the number of those who work in brothels with their own special problems of unlawful confinement, exploitation, torture, buying and selling of these “workers” and so on. The number of sex workers may run into many lakhs or millions.

The experience of many countries has revealed the insidious ways in which AIDS is contracted and transmitted even to the innocent and unsuspecting. We have seen results leading to highly reduced life expectancy, infant mortality, disintegration of the power of resistance and resilience in body and mind, and the erosion of the ability to work. Sex workers should have the right to register themselves as selfemployed workers, and should be entitled to benefits of all the schemes that we are recommending for self-employed workers, including welfare, medical benefits, etc. We should make special mention of the children of these women workers. They should not be denied opportunities for education open to other children.

Scavengers: There is a very large number of people engaged in manual scavenging in different parts of the country, in rural areas as well as urban areas. In violation of their basic human rights, they are physically abused and threatened with economic and social ostracism from the community for refusing to carry out various castebased tasks.

Women Building Workers: Building workers are employed mostly on daily wages, and occasionally according to measurement of the work completed. However, the names of women do not often appear on the wage register because their output gets added to that of their men folk except in the case of single women workers. Wages are paid every ten days only to men, and these include the wages due to other members of the family. Often maternity leave is not extended to women building workers, although it is a statutory obligation. This results in frequent miscarriages. and call of their employer. In many cases, they are not provided with adequate food. In some cases, they have to be satisfied with the leftovers of the employers. They do not earn enough to buy adequate clothing, and in some cases clothing that will protect them from the rigours of the climate. Again, in many cases, they are not provided with a safe and clean place where they can rest and sleep. It must be pointed out that since most of the domestic servants are women and children, they run the risk of sexual harassment and exploitation in some houses. It is therefore, very clear to us that domestic servants must be provided at least a modicum of protection and satisfactory safeguards for security.

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Rag Pickers: Rag picking and other types of scrap collection are not a new phenomenon especially in industrial towns and metropolitan cities. They have a bearing on the urban economy. Many production enterprises depend upon the recycling of these wastes. Scrap collection is mostly done by women and children in a working environment that is most unhygienic. According to available estimates, there are about 50 lakh scrap collectors in the country. The number is far greater if labourers in scrap establishments and re-processing units are included. Waste picking ranks lowest in the hierarchy of urban informal occupations. Illiterates, unskilled persons, illegal aliens and the poorest of the poor are pushed into this occupation, as they are unable to find any other kind of employment. Generally, there is no employer-employee relationship in this trade even though it is possible that some of the scrap picking activity is organized by contractors. Waste collectors are generally categorized as self-employed. Scrap collectors are not covered under the Shops and Establishments Act, as scrap traders do not provide any kind of receipts to them for the material they collect. No social security benefits are available to workers in this sector.

The handloom industry which has been the largest employer of women after agriculture and livestock suffered serious setbacks in the 1990s and is slowly being replaced by the beedi industry as the largest employer. The powerloom sector's growth has been at the expense of the organized mill sector. It is estimated that there are a total of about 17 lakh powerlooms in the country. Women are the main work force of both the handloom and powerloom sectors. Most of the workers are bonded with the owner by the advance they received. The feminization of employment provides the cheapest possible production for international suppliers to ensure maximum profits.

Education and healthcare are increasingly being privatized. These sectors employ large numbers of women for low wages with no social security. The challenges for women workers in these sectors are multifold and any resistance or unionization is met with force by the employers in complicity with the police and the state. In this context it is also appropriate to mention that established trade unions do not often give priority to the problems of women workers.

Problems faced by women workers in the informal economy

‘What is to be done’- Organizing the Unorganized: The existing legislation does not protect the vast majority of the women workers in the country. The Factories Act, 1948 covers working conditions, health and safety, basic amenities like toilets, creches, working hours etc. but does not apply to work places with fewer than 10 workers using power-driven machinery or less than 20 workers without such machinery. Employees State Insurance Act, 1948 providing for sickness, accident and maternity benefits at the ground level does not apply to the vast majority of women workers. The Employers by sub- contracting production and dividing the establishment into small units are able to evade all the existing laws. The Contract Labour Act, 1971 has been flouted by not just the private enterprises but the Government itself by the employment of contract labour for work of perennial nature. The Industrial Disputes Act of 1947 prevents arbitrary closure of industrial establishments and provides redress for workers dismissed for participation in trade union activities. This Act does not apply to workers in the informal sector. Without the protection that this Act provides (at least in theory), workers in the informal sector can be victimized or dismissed for participating in union activities.

There are many obstacles to organizing women in the informal sector. Women with the dual burden of working long hours in poor working conditions on the onehand and raising children and the domestic chores on the other find it hard to come to meetings. The struggles have to start with wages and job security and then move beyond those issues to raising the class consciousness of the workers. These struggles have to gradually move from the factories to the streets. The conditions for women workers can ultimately improve only through their participation in the revolutionary movement and only the victory of the working class can bring their emancipation.

Women in the unorganized sector and urban poverty: issues of livelihood: The impact of changing urban policies on the conditions and status of workers in unorganized. Urban casual informal workers have been left behind in grabbing the growing urban employment opportunities as they do not have adequate education and skills. The self-employed workers face specific problems of access to credit, markets and space and also incur various ‘hidden costs’.

The self-employed among the urban workers in the 15-64 years group has shown higher poverty rates than the salaried but much lower than the casual workers. The urban policy of sealing drives has affected economic condition of a large number of poor families. The social security and working conditions of the workers are important aspects and the report of the National Commission for Enterprises in Unorganized sector has suggested addressing these issues which is a welcome step.

Conclusion:

Skill is a form of security and it improves employability of the workers. A system of skill training for urban areas will be a useful way forward in promoting employment opportunities amongst the urban workers. Improving the conditions of work in the informal economy and Recognition of all workers including those whose workplace is within the home, implementing minimum wages and reducing gender disparity in earnings through strengthened monitoring and regulation. Strengthening access to social protection, with focus on old age pensions and health, including occupational health concerns in all sectors, including those where women are concentrated and which may be relatively invisible; skill development to enable higher earnings

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