WOMEN WORKERS IN UNORGANIZED SECTOR IN INDIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

ABSTRACT

Hajra Masood
Research Scholar
Department of Sociology
Aligarh Muslim University

Mrs. Qaiser Jahan
Associate Professor
Women’s College
Aligarh Muslim University

Almost 400 million people (more than 85 percent of the working population in India) work in unorganized sector and of these at least 120 million are women. Women working in the informal sector are not included in the official statistics and their work is undocumented and considered as disguised wage work, unskilled, low paying and does not provide benefits to the worker. India was one of the first countries in the world to give women the right to vote. The Indian constitution is one of the most progressive in the world and guarantees equal rights for men and women. Despite the advances women have made in many societies, women’s concerns are still given second priority almost everywhere. They continue to face discrimination and marginalization both subtle and blatant and do not share equally in the fruits of development. Their contribution is not given due credit. Women workers in unorganized sector lag behind the males in terms of level and quality of employment.

The aim of this paper is to explore the issues, concerns and prospects of women workers in unorganized sector in India in general. The paper will be based on case studies conducted in Okhla region in South Delhi.

Key Words: women workers, unorganized sector in India, case studies in Okhla region.
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"You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women". - Jawaharlal Nehru

Introduction

The present study was carried out with women construction workers and domestic helpers working in the unorganized sector in Okhla region of South Delhi. An attempt has been made in the paper to understand the socio-economic condition of women laborers, nature of their work, their working conditions, wage pattern, wage discrimination and other difficulties faced by them at their work place. Multistage stratified random sampling technique was applied to collect data from 35 women laborers from Okhla region South Delhi. Findings show that majority of the migrant women were engaged in the construction industry and were only employed in unskilled and low paying jobs as coolies, laborers and helpers. Women were exploited to a greater degree as they were paid less compared to men for similar nature of work and hours spent on work. The conditions of work in the unorganized sector were unsatisfactory and the problems confronted by them were acute. And that their illiteracy, poverty and indebtedness forced them to work for lower wages and under unjust conditions.

The Unorganized Sector

Organized sector workers are distinguished by regular salaried jobs with well-defined terms and conditions of employment, clear-cut rights and obligations and fairly comprehensive social security protection. The unorganized sector, on the other hand, has no such clear-cut employer-employee relationships and lacks most forms of social protection. Having no fixed employer, these workers are casual, contractual, migrant, home based, own-account workers who attempt to earn a living from whatever meager assets and skills they possess. National Commission on Labour (1966-69) has defined unorganized labour as those who have not been able to organize themselves in pursuit of common objectives on account of constraints like casual nature of employment, ignorance and illiteracy, small and scattered size of establishments and position of power enjoyed by employers because of nature of industry. The unorganized sector is characterized by the presence of factors viz. long hours of work, wage discrimination of men and women, lack of job security, no minimum wages, lack of minimum facilities at work place, ill-treatment, heavy physical work and sexual exploitation etc. The laboring women generally work in unorganized sector. They are outside the reach of Protective Labour Laws and Trade Union Organizations. They are not offered fair wages and decent terms of work. There are hardly any opportunities to improve their income because in this sector, females work generally as laborers in unskilled occupations, do traditional work as domestic servants. The process of globalization, export oriented industrialization and relocation of industries from the developed to developing countries also lead to increase in women workers in unorganized sector. The nature of women’s work ranges from wage employment or self-employment, family labour and piece rated work. The prevalence of women workers in urban unorganized sector is significant in number. They are engaged in activities like domestic work, construction work, small trades like brick making, coir and basket weaving, household industries etc. In rural unorganized sector women are engaged in agricultural activities, animal husbandry, dairy, fisheries etc. In the present paper the status of women domestic workers, construction workers and agriculture laborers was studied through an empirical study.
Most of the domestic workers and construction workers are primarily women who have migrated from rural areas for economic gain. The influx of women workers to the cities for non-farm employment has saturated the existing sectors and is one of the main reasons for her extreme exploitation. Hardships of city life, absence of basic amenities and exploitation of these women by employers have added to their misery.

The condition of women agriculture labour in rural areas is no better. Most of them do not have year round employment. They suffer vital disadvantages compared to men in their search for employment opportunities, lower real wages, increased uncertainties and irregularities of employment. There are legal provisions to protect their rights. Such working conditions are a hurdle in their overall development leading to under performance and not allowing them to raise their productive capacity in that very profession also.

**Literature Review**

The study conducted by Unni, (1989) concluded that female workers had to bear the work burden the most and they remained still the most disadvantaged class of workers. They put in at least 12-14 hours of work every day but their economic activities were not fully recognized, counted and included in the national product, though women’s work included many activities which lead to the economic gain of the household.

Saran and Sandhewar (1990) studied the problems of women workers engaged in unorganized sector. It was revealed by their study that the women were exploited, low paid, worked for long hours i.e. 14-16 hours in case of migrants and 8-10 hours in case of local workers. There prevailed mass illiteracy, belonged to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and backward classes and indebtedness was common. Further, rebuking, cheating, threatening, beating and sexual abuses were a common feature reported by women working in unorganized sector.

Sultania, (1994) conducted a study at micro-level in the major parts of Jaipur city on the women workers engaged as contract laborers. The main analysis was based on the causes of inequality of women contract laborers and its impact. The characteristics, profile and recruitment were also dealt with. It was projected that construction was the main industry employing labour on contract basis. The women workers there experienced sexual and socio-economic exploitation. They were illiterate, earning fewer wages, experienced male dominance, worked for 10-12 hours daily had no medical or leave facilities and were under pitiable state of affairs.

Anand, (1998) analyzed the characteristics of the construction workers, predominantly migrant workers and the intervention strategies adopted to facilitate the reach out services to these women workers along with awareness of their rights and utilization. He suggested that NGOs and other organizations can play a vital role through campaigning and active participation by creating awareness amongst these women workers and unionism and cooperatives would yield results as far as struggle for better wages and working conditions are concerned.

Srinivasan, (2000) studied the conceptual issues of the unorganized sector along with profile of women’s employment and its trend. He concluded that employment for the unorganized women workers moved to the sectors where these women had no say at all and away from the legal protection. Non-farm employment hailed as the panacea for surplus-labour in agricultural sector which could not pick up in rural India and the women were most affected.

Singh, (2002) conducted a study on domestic workers of Ranchi District. She concluded that lack of awareness and basic education lead to exploitation. The system of recruitment was faulty and age of recruitment often
violated human rights. Wages were too low and workers did not enjoy any kind of medical benefit. Their hours of work were very long and not spread out evenly. There were no holidays or leave sanctioned or approved by their employers. They lacked work proficiency and did not possess formal training. She further reported that basic poverty lead to poor bargaining capacity. The workers did not possess knowledge of alternate sources of income generation. Fatalism and superstition were all pervasive. She found that in most cases the number of dependents on the earning members was too large, this lowered the standard of living and at times lead to indebtedness.

Objectives of the study
The objectives of the study were:
1. To know the socio-economic background of women construction and domestic labourers.
2. To find out the nature of work and working conditions of women labourers.
3. To study the wage patterns and causes of discrimination in wages of women labourers.
4. To find out what type of facilities are available to women labourers and to study their living conditions.
5. To trace out the basic problems faced by women labourers.

Methodology
For the purpose of study a sample of 70 women were purposely selected. 35 of whom worked as domestic helpers in Okhla and nearby regions and 35 of them were working as helpers as construction workers. These women are residing in small hut shaped houses named as jhuggi in local language. These women were interviewed with structured interview schedule and for further detail study 2 cases were studied to support the research.

Findings of the Study
It was found that the majority of the workers (66%) belonged to scheduled castes or tribal communities and backward castes in the case of construction sector, who have been traditionally cast into a role of subordination and inferiority in the Indian ethos. Their lack of exposure to complex competitive urban life and absence of skills compel them to enter into the domain of unorganized sector. Most of the construction workers (91%) had migrated from Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. The construction industry provides for a significant source of direct employment for the migrant unskilled and semi-skilled workers, through which a substantial section of the poor are able to earn an income. The migration from rural to urban areas especially to metropolitan cities was due to lack of employment opportunities for downtrodden and rural poor, short of satisfactory increase in agricultural production to support the population, natural calamity, inadequate housing and civic amenities and lack of adequate infrastructure facilities thereby push the people to migrate to urban areas.

The construction industry is labour intensive and is governed by the system of contracting and sub-contracting. It is the only industry in which the product remains and the workers move. Women are employed in almost all the work related to the construction process, from foundation work to roofing and beyond. They help in removing over-ground materials once excavated, carry water, sand, cement mixture for foundation laying and concrete pouring etc. carry stone, bricks and tools required at the premises. Women also help in the erection of scaffolding by carrying centering materials, do the smoothening of surfaces with available local materials before concrete mixture is poured for roof slabs and once a structure is laid, do the curing operations etc. Although they
do a substantial amount of work they are always paid less compared to their male counterparts who do the same work. They receive Rs. 20 to 30 lesser than the males. One of the main reasons reported by the construction workers was that women could not do tougher jobs that demand more physical exertion followed by being an unskilled labour they were paid less.

With more and more women stepping out of their homes to contribute to family’s income the demand for domestic help is on the rise. These domestic helps are hired for doing all kinds of household chores like cleaning the house, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, cooking food, baby sitting and running little errands etc. The basic nature of their work could be described as physically exhausting, tedious, monotonous and repetitive. Domestic workers are amongst the worst paid workers. The results revealed that the majority of these workers earned only Rs. 30-40 per day. It is important to note that these abysmally low wages are not due to a lack of productivity on the part of domestic workers, but are rather a function of their low bargaining power. Domestic worker is treated like a marketable commodity. Employers determine who they want to employ, for how long, at what wages and conditions, and at what point the domestic worker should be dismissed, with the domestic employee having negligible bargaining power is an easy victim of exploitation.

The domestic workers are employed in the private sphere of the house and their work is deemed as subservient. They tend to work for irregular hours and are subject to many forms of abuse and humiliation including threats of job loss. They are prone to numerous problems like lack of living space, receiving less than the minimum wages, wage rates at the discretion of individual employers, health and sanitation problems, lack of job security, lack of sick or maternity benefits and others. They were duped due to their illiteracy and poverty.

**Why Do Women Work?**

Women work basically for economic independence, for economic necessity some women are qualified enough that they work for achievement, some work to service society. Most of the women by and then under-take productive work only under economic compulsion. This is the reason for high female participation rates in economically under privileged communities. Usually upper class women are limited to homes. Work participation rate is found to be higher among rural women (27%) than urban women (10%).

We find that women usually go in for temporary and standby jobs because of the prevalent hesitancy to employ women in regular jobs and providing them with good working conditions. Most of the women are found to be employed in agricultural activities and in unorganized sector. The employment of women is high in the unorganized sector such as part time helpers in households, construction center, tanneries (setting, parting and drying), match and beedi industries.

**Conclusion**

Varied reasons could be assigned for the existing deplorable state of affairs of women in unorganized sector. It is mainly due to a segment working against women in labor market. Besides lack of organization in terms of forming trade unions among female workers, adverse impact of technological growth on women labour, absence of purposeful human resource development policy on improving women’s employability through training, inadequate legislation and ineffective enforcement of safeguards to protect female workers, particularly in terms
of their working conditions etc. are few of the major causes leading to pitiable condition of women workers. Under these existing conditions it would not be out of context to say that the government should make efforts to improve their working conditions in terms of occupational safety, working hours, payment of adequate wages to them so that the women workers engaged in unorganized sector of employment may have mandatory decent and dignified work.

References: