

Problems Faced by Women in the Unorganized Sector

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Introduction

The problems of women workers in general and in the unorganised sector in particular deserve special emphasis and focus in view of their marginalised position within the class of workers. Even when women are not employed in the sense of contributing to the national output, a considerable share of their time is consumed by socially productive and reproductive labour. This is what is called the 'double burden of work' that distinguishes women from men. For women workers in the informal economy the double burden of combining the tasks of production and reproduction is even more arduous because they are already engaged in activities that require long hours to obtain a subsistence wage¹.

The unorganized sector is too vast to remain in the confines of the conceptual definition. Hence, descriptive means are used to identify the unorganized sector².

Double Burden of Work

A woman engages as a subsidiary worker, in part-time work and with considerable domestic duties, and yet is available for additional work.

Women undertake a number of activities that help their household to save incomes, if not to directly earn it. Fetching water and free collection of firewood, including preparation of cow-dung cakes, are the predominant activities in rural

areas. In urban areas, these are fetching water, sewing and tailoring and tutoring children free of cost. Many of these activities are included in the count of extended SNA activities as discussed above. If all these were to be included as economic activities, the participation rates of women would be considerably higher than what has been currently estimated³.

Women in the Unorganized Sector of India The type of activities they are willing to engage in are mainly spinning, weaving and tailoring in rural and urban areas and animal husbandry in rural areas⁴.

Nature of Work Participation of Women

Women's work participation rates reflect the twin characteristics of their work, double burden of productive and reproductive responsibilities and being confined to non- conventional spaces of work. These features together with the poor access to human and physical capital lead to much lower participation of adult women in the workforce than men. The disparity in work participation across rural and urban areas is also large. While nearly half the rural adult women participate in the workforce, only a little more than one-fifth of the urban women do so. This is partly explained by the self-employment on land or engagement in livestock related activities (e.g. taking care of cattle) in the rural areas⁵.

However, the work participation rates for women belonging to SCs/STs are significantly higher than women in general. Such a high work participation rate for rural women does not mean that their economic condition is better than their counterparts in the urban areas. In fact, the reality is to the contrary, given the low level of wages in rural areas, highly restricted work opportunities (mostly in agriculture and related activities) and the social constraints imposed especially on those who come from the bottom layer of the social hierarchy. A higher work

participation rate in such a context is more likely the result of economic hardships than the availability of work opportunities. This is also corroborated by the low level of education of rural women workers⁶.

The low level of education is a serious handicap for not only women workers in general but rural women in particular. Here again the bottom layer is the rural women belonging to SC/ ST categories⁷.

Subsidiary Status Work

Another prominent characteristic of women's work force participation is that even within the low participation of women, a large part is of subsidiary work status, nearly a quarter of the women workers. Subsidiary status workers are non-workers or the unemployed persons engaged in an economic activity for part of the year⁸.

Again the societal compulsions and double responsibilities would partly explain this phenomenon. The interesting feature is that it is mainly the self-employed women who engage in work in a subsidiary capacity and, to some extent, women casual workers, who perhaps tend to have fewer employment opportunities. In the case of the casual workers it would be the compulsions and pressures of survival that make them work in their principal capacity. In marked contrast, a negligible proportion of men work as subsidiary workers⁹.

Textile Industry

In the occupations related to the textile industry, the jobs of supervisors and machine operators are male dominated, while the preparatory work of making of fibre and yarn, spinning and winding are dominated by women. In the garment industry women tailors are not too few, but it is the kind of garments that they

stitch that makes the difference in valuation. Sewing and embroidery works are clearly dominated by women¹⁰.

Women receive lower wages and have limited job mobility in the hierarchy of the knitwear industry¹¹.

In the textile and wearing apparel industry all jobs done by hand and involving minimal or low level equipment is delegated to the women. The myth of "nimble fingers" is also used to relegate much of the work done by hand to women. So while women sew the buttons, do the hemming and hand stitching, they also do the embroidery work, zardosi and stitching of sequences to the dresses. This latter is a very skilled activity, but is valued very low because it is seen as women's work¹².

Health Problems

Health of an individual is closely linked to his/her status in the society. Women universally have lower status and are seen only in their reproductive roles. Women get less money for their work; get no medical and other benefits that the employment rules provide. Women bear a triple burden of reproduction, production and domestic work¹³.

A large number of women workers complain of frequent headaches, back pain, circulation disorders, fatigue, and emotional and mental disorders. Poor nutritional status, anaemia due to poverty and the cultural practices where women eat last and the increased workload due to domestic responsibilities, leads to fatigue among women. Worry, responsibility, strong emotions, concentrated attention or precision required by some jobs like embroidery, assembly of electronic or electric appliances, setting of gems, jewellery etc., and exhaustion caused by intellectual or mental activities also produce fatigue. Lack of basic

facilities like toilets, rest rooms, dining spaces etc at the workplace cause a lot of physical discomfort and mental stress besides leading to urinary tract infection and other diseases, particularly among pregnant women. Women working in some industries like construction, brick kilns, electronics industry etc. suffer from gynaecological problems, miscarriages, premature deliveries etc. and give birth to babies with low birth weight or with birth defects¹⁴.

Emotional Problems

Unemployment, under-employment and temporary work are more common among women than among men. With no social security or health care benefits, the work-related illnesses, which they suffer from, remain hidden. As per available research, unemployment is harmful to health and constitutes a serious risk for the workers' emotional stability, because it leads to poverty, deteriorates self-image and self esteem. A large number of women workers complain of symptoms such as irritability, mood swings, and depression, sadness and concentration problems, which very often are related to type of work and work conditions¹⁵.

Problems of Home Workers

The home workers are dependent on the sub-contractor for supply of work, raw material and sale of finished goods. They are also isolated from their fellow women workers in the same trade. This dependence on the contractor together with the isolation undermines their ability to bargain for higher piece- rates, timely payments or overtime pay¹⁶.

The home workers are paid piece-rate wages for the work delivered. This wage has many hidden costs, including use of the house and electricity. Delayed payments and arbitrary cuts in wages on the pretext of poor quality also add to the hidden costs¹⁷.

Changing as well as complicated designs due to fashions when no training is provided for adds to the costs since one has to learn the new work from family friends or neighbours utilizing valuable time of both the informal trainers and trainees. Some not so hidden costs are the cost of inputs such as thread for the garment workers and maintenance of equipment. All these are often not factored into the wages leading to extremely low net wages per day¹⁸.

Conclusion

The overall picture that emerges is one of greater disadvantage for women workers in general and those belonging to rural as well as SCs/STs in particular. Apart from such inherited disadvantages as lower social position, a number of other factors also contribute to such a picture. These are their limited asset position, access to resources, and low level of education and skill. Education, and consequently some ability to acquire formal skills, could be a moderating force but this aspect presents a dismal picture. The overall situation of women workers calls for interventions of a promotional nature from different entry points but with a strong emphasis on education.

Though more and more women are coming out in search of paid employment as their families need their income, the attitude towards women and their role in the family has not undergone much change. Women continue to be perceived as weak, inferior, and second-class citizen.

End Notes

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