



WOMEN WORKERS IN UNORGANIZED SECTOR: SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Harigopal Agrawal

Assistant Professor - HOD, Economics Department, Shri K R Desai Arts And Commerce College, Jhalod, Dist – Dahod (Gujarat)

INTRODUCTION

A woman is identified as a mother, a wife, a daughter-in-law or a daughter but never as an independent person. To be born as a woman means to inhabit, from early infancy to the last day of life, a psychological world that differs from the world of the man. Much of the exasperation and discrimination in woman's life stems from this fact. The overall picture is one of greater disadvantage for women workers in general and those belonging to unorganized sector in particular. As a matter of fact, the problem of female worker is the index of the status of Indian labour in both organized and unorganized sectors. Any discussion regarding the problems associated with the women labour has many aspects, such as economic, political, psychological, sociological and legal etc.

The employment in the organized sector requires certain minimum qualifications and most of these educated women workers are drawn from middle classes and richer sections, a very few women from lower class would get chance in these jobs. The National Commission on Labour describes some characteristics and constraints of unorganized sector, namely: (a) casual nature of employment; (b) ignorance and illiteracy; (c) small size of establishment with low capital investment per person employed; (d) scattered nature of establishments; and (e) superior strength of the employers operating singly and in combination.

Almost 400 million people (more than 85% of the working population in India) work in unorganized sector and of these about 120 million are women. According to an estimate, by the National Commission on Self-Employed Women (1988a), of the total number of women workers in India, about 94 percent are in the informal or unorganized sector whereas just 6 percent are in the organized or formal sector. Thus there is no exaggeration in saying that the unorganized sector in India is the women's sector. However, the plight of women in this sector is miserable as they work for extremely low wages, with a total lack of job security and social security benefits, working hours are long and working conditions are unsatisfactory. According to census 2011, women constitute 48.46 percent of the total population in India and about 25.67 percent of female population is designated as workers. Two National Labour Commissions, along with several other international and national commissions, committees and conferences in the last 50 years have documented the socio-economic conditions of workers in the unorganized sector in India. The Arjun Sengupta Committee report is a stark reminder of the huge size and poor conditions in this sector. The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS), has extensively profiled the unorganized sector and unorganized employment in its report, *The Challenges of Employment in India-An Informal Economy Perspective*. (April, 2009) and suggested the measures that are considered necessary for enhancing competitiveness of the unorganized

sector in the emerging global environment and generation of large scale employment opportunities on sustainable basis. The most significant finding is that the economy will experience a greater degree of informalisation of employment that will increase the already high share of informal workers from 91.8% to 93.9% by 2016-17 (Table).

| Year | GDP Growth Rate | Projected Employment (In Million) | | | |
|---------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|----------|----------|-------|
| | | Agriculture | Industry | Services | Total |
| 2011-12 | 9% | 229.2 | 105.0 | 153.5 | 487.7 |
| | 7% | 225.4 | 102.0 | 149.0 | 476.4 |
| | 5% | 221.5 | 99.1 | 144.6 | 465.2 |
| 2016-17 | 9% | 240.2 | 126.2 | 189.5 | 555.9 |
| | 7% | 232.0 | 116.8 | 174.8 | 523.5 |
| | 5% | 224.0 | 108.1 | 161.2 | 493.3 |

Source: 'The Challenge of Employment in India – An Informal Economy Perspective

Projected Employment in Agriculture, Industry and Services

The most important features of unorganized sector are that most of the women labourers are appointed as contract labourers. Studies conducted in several parts of the country indicate the awful conditions of the women workers in this sector. They continue to face discrimination and marginalization both subtle and blatant and do not share the fruits of development equally. Ignorance, traditional bound attitudes, illiteracy, lack of skills, seasonal nature of employment, heavy physical work of different types, lack of job security, lack of a comprehensive legislation to cover these workers in unorganized sector and competition in employment are resultant deprivation of real wage. Wages in the unorganized sector are arbitrarily fixed, often without regard to the minimum wage legislations, which adversely affect the income of the wage workers in general, and women workers in particular. In the informal sector, wage workers constituted 36% and the remaining 64% were self-employed. Average wage of men and women workers are Rs. 75 and Rs. 45 respectively which is much less than the wage of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (MGNREGP) i.e. Rs.100. Another dimension of this wage result shows the existence of gender bias in unorganized sector in terms of wage level.

The higher level of unemployment and under-employment among women leads us to conclude that their proportion below the poverty line is likely to be higher than men. Women who are drawn from rural areas are unskilled labourers. The life of unorganized sector worker is very tough. They are exploited in many ways. The exploitation is not only carried on the class lines but also on the lines of male domination over females. Sexual harassment is common but unarticulated due to fear of loss of employment. Despite the advances women have made in many

societies, women's concerns are still given second priority almost everywhere. Their contribution is not given due credits. Women workers in unorganized sector lag behind the males in terms of level and quality of employment. There are still cases where women workers are deprived of the benefits and amenities like equal remuneration vis-à-vis their male counterparts, maternity benefits, proper child care services and indifferent attitude of the employers towards women workers. Research shows that women and girls, who tend to work harder than men, are more likely to invest their earnings in their children, are major producers as well as consumers and shoulder critical, life sustaining responsibilities without which men and boys could not survive, much less enjoy high levels of productivity. Such women, when they have to perform dual role of both outside employment in harsh and hostile working conditions and manage their homes, come across problems, which needs a loud hearing. The major problems they face are poverty, lack of access to education and inadequate healthcare facilities. Living in abject poverty, most workers in the unorganized sector barely manage a subsistence existence. The rising costs of private healthcare and the systematic dismantling of the public health system in these times of liberalization are a major reason for the huge indebtedness of households in the unorganized sector. There is a pressing need to provide insurance, especially health insurance cover to the workers. Several factors responsible for their plight are indifferent attitude of the employers towards women workers, their weak bargaining power and in many cases the women workers themselves being unaware of their rights. From the close study, it can be easily estimated that the women working in unorganized sector are living a life far below from satisfaction.

It is not that there are no statutory provisions to ensure fair working conditions for women in India. In fact, the Constitution of India provides equal rights and opportunities to both the genders. In addition, there are specific provisions for protection and welfare of working women in many of the labour laws. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a major step in the direction of providing security of employment to rural workers. One of the successes of MGNREGA is that, on average the participation of women in the programme is higher than the stipulated minimum requirement of 30%. Women constitute 46% of the beneficiaries in 2007-08. Although the Government is seized of the situation, yet it continues to remain a problem area due to non-availability of reliable statistical data and other information pertaining to working, living and socio-economic conditions of women workers. The first enquiry for studying socio-economic conditions of women worker was undertaken by Labour Bureau in the year 1953 and a report titled "The Economic and Social Status of Women Workers in India" was brought out.

No doubt, there are laws to protect women and prevent exploitation but these laws (the Interstate Migrant Workmen Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service Act, 1979, The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 and Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 etc.), and legislations are not practically and strictly implemented. The very vastness of the country, the scattered nature of women workers, their lack of education and legal literacy, the indifferent attitude of the government-bureaucracy and the general status of women in society caused vulnerability to women. It is the need of the hour that government and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) must come forward to actively and efficiently deal with the plight of these women. The Trade Unions and Voluntary Organizations can play a vital role in making them conscious of health, education and above all their rights. Women should be

provided education and training to enhance their sense of self-worth and self-esteem and to enlighten them regarding their right to good health. Therefore a credible employment strategy needs to focus to enhance educational level of the workers, social status of workers including women, specific industries that can absorb a higher proportion of males and females and creation of quality job.

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