Socio-Economic Profile of Women Workers in Unorganised Sector

Women constitute the largest segment of India’s unorganised workforce. According to National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER), almost 97 per cent female workers are involved in the unorganised or informal sector\(^1\). They are from the poorest rural households and very often from scheduled, backward or tribal castes.

Women’s work most of the time goes unrecognised and the benefits hardly reach them. They enter into the labour market only when the economic compulsions force them to supplement the meagre family earnings. The concept to work as a supplementing or balancing force in the family has made them susceptible to all sorts of discriminatory treatment and exploitation (physically, economically and socially) in the field of employment.

At the root of all malaise that women suffer in employment is mainly due to the absence or poor quality of education that they get in Indian society. Indian history reveals that so long as women are equally educated, they had equal rights. Gradually they were withdrawn from education and thereafter they became second grade citizen. Thus, for thousands of years, women have been made silent and invisible not only by pressure against them playing any role outside the home but also by lack of education. Education is essential in the process of women gaining confidence, self-esteem and the skills to equip them in the struggle for equal right. A brief generalised account of the conditions of women workers is being given below:

**Double Burden of Work**

The problems of the women workers in the unorganised sector in particular deserve special emphasis because of their marginalised position within the class of workers. The double burden of work is even more arduous when they have to perform a reproductive role at home front as well as long hours to obtain a subsistence wage at the centre of employment. A reproductive role of women is less visible and less recognised by the society. They engage in multiple livelihood activities to fulfill their productive and reproductive role. The CSO\(^2\) (1998) of the Government of India provided official visibility to this double burden of work through a pilot study of utilisation of time by men and women in six states according to which women spend nearly 35 hours a week on care of children, old and the sick at home and household maintenance compared to less than
four hours spent by men. George\(^3\) (1990) found in case of women beedi workers that a woman is associated with her house and is expected to look after domestic chores and her typical roles are those of a housewife and a mother. Lack of education, ignorance and poverty compel the women from this class to accept whatever unskilled job is available on whatever wage the employer wishes to pay.

**Gender Discrimination**

Gender discrimination at the workplace is subtle and is reflected in the nature of work performed, valuation of the skills and the technology used by men and women. Generally lower wage rate jobs are assigned to women and higher wage rate jobs are assigned to men.

According to Jawahar Lal Singh *et. al.*\(^4\) (2002), women workers suffer vital disadvantages comparative to men in their search for employment opportunities, lower real wages, increased uncertainties and irregularities of employment. They do not possess much of skill, training and education for the type of work they perform. Thus, women in the unorganised sector are oppressed sections of the society as they live under subdued conditions with family and children, devoid of proper living and working conditions, even they receive humiliating treatment from the contractors.

In a study of the garment industry in Tiruppur, Vijayabhaskar\(^5\) (2002) noted that women workers in Tiruppur were concentrated in the lowest paid category of workers receiving substantially lower wages than men. Women were concentrated in embroidery, cleaning, finishing, tagging and packaging. Most recently, women are entering into stitching in large numbers. There is a clear sexual division of labour and with the introduction of machines this has further been augmented and facilitated. The fashion masters are the most skilled and this category is exclusively reserved for male workers. Machine attendants carry out the actual process of knitting, control, adjust and monitor the process with the assistance of helpers. Female workers are mostly helpers in these units and their chance of moving from helpers to attendants is nil, while the male workers are able to make this vertical movement. This very clear sexual division of labour has implications for the wages earned, permanency in the job and the possibilities for upward mobility in the industry. Neetha\(^6\) (2002) also observed that women receive lower wages and have limited job mobility in the hierarchy of the knitwear industry.

Rao and Hussain\(^7\) (1997) also observed sexual division of labour in garment export industry in Delhi where the hierarchy was such that men were the supervisors since men tailors ‘do not like to take orders from women’. In the supervisory category
usually women supervised only women. Men tended to be placed in all the critical skilled jobs and were consequently paid higher wages. Hand embroidery done by women was the most skilled and time intensive, but pays the lowest wages, i.e. women’s skills were systematically undervalued. Studies have brought out that women also did the most monotonous jobs, such as, checking, button stitching and thread cutting, the drudgery was greater and the wages were lower.

**Occupational Profile**

In the unorganised sector women are engaged in almost all kinds of activities such as livestock, forestry, fishing, plantation, construction, retailing, beedi making, bangle making, pottery, embroidery, stitching etc. Most of the women work as casual labourers in agriculture, construction, brick-making, coir, or as own account workers in handloom weaving, basket weaving and vending fish/ vegetables. Some of the newer activities are floriculture, poultry and livestock rearing, garment making, food processing and fish processing etc.⁸

According to Das⁹, in fisheries (marine and inland) women dominate the handling and processing activity accounting for about 70 per cent of the workforce and in brassware industry women constitute 50 per cent of the total workforce. As per available estimate there are about 50 lakhs scrap collectors in the country. Illiterate, unskilled persons and poorest of poor persons are pushed into this occupation. A study shows that about 92 per cent of scrap collectors are women in the age group of 19-50 years with the minimum age of entry between 9-10 years.

*Beedi* rolling is a major source of employment for women which, however, remains low paid, insecure and has health implications. It is estimated that there are 4.5 million *beedi* workers in India of whom 80 per cent are women.¹⁰

A large proportion of food processing in the unorganised sector in carried out by women using the traditional skills in many primary food processing areas. The informal or unorganised service sector is expanding too, generating large scale openings of opportunities for women. The largest increase in employment opportunities come from domestic service, education including home tuition, childcare and health services. Unfortunately, these women workers have received little attention with the result that their earnings remain low and their employment insecure.¹¹

**Wages and Earnings**

Krishnamoorthy¹² (1999) observed that *agarbatti* rollers whether home or factory-based are paid on a piece-rate basis. Earnings vary across states with workers in
Karnataka appearing to be somewhat better placed in contrast to their counterparts in Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, the other two states for which estimates are available. Workers here are paid at a rate of Rs. 9 per 1000 sticks and at an average productivity of 4000 sticks per full working day manage an effective wage rate of Rs. 36 per day. The average worker manages to earn about Rs. 1000 per month. In Gujarat, the rate is much lower at Rs. 5 per 1000 sticks and combined with lower productivity rates yields the workers incomes in the range of Rs. 325 per month. Payment in both these states is reported to be on a monthly basis. In Andhra Pradesh a rate of Rs. 6 per kilo of masala processed is reported. Earnings for a family of six were reported in the range of Rs. 400 to 800 for a six day week implying an effective wage of Rs. 12 to 20 per day. Further, if the product is rejected for quality reasons the loss has to be borne by the workers lowering earnings further.

Sengupta\textsuperscript{13} (2005) also detected that women working in mining industry of Rajasthan are deprived of even the minimum wages, what to talk of welfare measures. They are never employed on a permanent basis. The basic nature of their work requires strenuous physical labour in heat and dust. Women are employed both on daily wages as well as on piece rate. In a daily wage system a woman gets a minimum of Rs. 40 and a maximum of Rs. 60 per day, with working hours starting at 8:00 am in the morning and ending during the sunset. There is no concept of paid maternity or medical leave.

Uma Kothari\textsuperscript{14} (1997) observed that in case of domestic workers the remuneration paid to the women workers sometimes includes the labour of daughters, so that young girls work as a component of their mother’s wage. Tasks that a woman worker is required to carry out are often divided between mother and daughter and change in time, with increasing responsibilities being placed on the daughter. They are both clothed and fed, but the daughter never receives a cash payment.

**Working Conditions**

The working conditions are another important aspect of the unorganised sector, and are of particular importance to the women workers. The assessment of working conditions of women labour is also important to have a deep understanding of their life. The working conditions imply the duration of working hours, nature of work, terms and conditions of payment and overtime payment etc.

Hanumappa\textsuperscript{15} (1996) observed the working conditions of the home-based workers engaged in *agarbatti* making in Bangalore and found that the workers roll *agarbattis* on the pavements and lanes around homes in urban slums. They sit on the floor and roll the
agarbattis hunched over low tables bought out of their own resources and their legs are stretched under these low tables.

According to Chatterjee\textsuperscript{16} (2009), the reasons for vulnerability of the unorganised women workers are irregular work, low economic status, little or no bargaining power, lack of control over earnings, need to balance paid work with care for children and home, little or no access to institutional credit, training and information, and lack of assets. Unequal gender relations assume a very important role in defining their insecurities.

Sengupta\textsuperscript{17} (2010) observed that the tasks performed by women are usually those that require them to be in one position for long periods of time, which can adversely affect their reproductive health. A study in a rice-growing belt of coastal Maharashtra found that 40 per cent of all infant deaths occurred in the months of July to October. The study also found that a majority of births were either premature or stillbirths. Women in gold mines handle mercury and cyanide with their bare hands. Woman has to work beyond working hours, even in advanced stages of pregnancy, and there is no leave facility. In some quarries in Orissa, women have to work at night and are sexually abused. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), other sexually transmitted diseases, respiratory problems, silicosis, tuberculosis, leukemia, arthritis and reproductive problems are more prevalent among women working in mines.

Rajalakshmi\textsuperscript{18} (2005) observed through a study that women work as hard as men, perhaps even more, considering the burden of household duties and rearing children. They work mainly in the textile, garments and carpet clusters. More women than men report injuries at work. Two-thirds of the women say that the average duration of maternity leave is 90 days, but without remuneration.

Farooqui\textsuperscript{19} (2009) found that the overall condition of work for home-based women workers is extremely exploitative with no legal recognition as workers, no job security, no social security like old age pension, health insurance or provident fund, long hours of work and no implementation of the minimum wage norm. Women who do home-based work regularly suffer from health hazards like backaches and failing eyesight. Since they work from their homes, they often do not perceive themselves as workers but as mothers and wives, while the employer ends up making more profits by paying lower wages as well as saving the cost of operating a workplace like rent, electricity, water, equipment and other maintenance costs.
Usha\textsuperscript{20} in her study about the women working in the textile shops of Trivendrum found that women are not provided with adequate space for taking food and rest. Women in this field are not getting service benefits as and when they quit the field. The women in this field are getting a nominal increment as per the whims and fancies of the owner. The facility of provident fund and insurance is limited to only two per cent workers.

**Health Conditions**

Due to diversified nature of the work in various kinds of unorganised activities, the health problems become a constraint for women workers.

Nath\textsuperscript{21} (2009) highlighted in selected districts and blocks in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Chattisgarh the poor access to health services for women wage labourers in the informal sector. In all these three states a large population of female workers was found to be engaged in agriculture, forestry and stone quarrying. These women started working as early as 18 years or even earlier, and continued until past 55 years. Working in extreme conditions has led to a number of health risks both due to the heavy work burden and nature of their work. Sufferings from muscular aches and pains, injuries, exhaustion, weakness, fever and swelling of feet were quite common and went untreated. Nath observed that lack of health benefits, high infertility rate, poor and unequal wages, improper sanitation and childcare facilities were becoming major concerns with these working women. Public spending on the health in all the three regions was found to be inadequate. Irregular growth and poverty were seen to be major bottlenecks. In Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, lack of money was reported as a barrier in accessing maternal healthcare, and women in Chattisgarh needed to take loans for childbirth expenses. In Uttar Pradesh working conditions were gruesome. Even after childbirth, the women got only 6-12 days off from work. No work means no money, which put their survival at stake.

According to Das\textsuperscript{22}, the presence of a vast multitude of women as workers and producers in the unorganised sector, where earnings are low, employment seasonal and insecure, supportive services woefully inadequate or even non-existent, growth opportunities few and collective organisation weak, has brought into sharp focus with the failure of the mainstream to alleviate their predicament. Workers, irrespective of sex, are exploited in the unorganised sector but women suffer more by the fact of their gender. In case of construction work, Das observed that women are mostly exploited. They are employed on casual basis. Unstable employment/ earnings and shifting of workplaces are
the bare characteristics of work for construction workers. In most cases safety norms are violated. They are often not given maternity benefits, though obligatory.

**Sexual Harassment**

According to Paul and Agarwal\(^2\) (1997) as per the definition of sexual harassment made by a Supreme Court order in India in 1997 includes physical contact and advances; sexual favours; sexually coloured remarks; showing of pornography, and any other verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature that is unwelcome or humiliating to the women.

According to the National Campaign Committee for Unorganised Sector Workers\(^2\) (NCCUSW) (2006), women workers get the work through middlemen or agents who pay them at times as little as Rs 10. a day. Women who work on worksites like construction work or brick kilns face problems of childcare, have no toilet or drinking water facilities and are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Women face lack of sanitation facilities and crèches at the workplace.

Deshingkar\(^2\) (2009) observed that the sexual exploitation of tribal construction women workers by masons, contractors, the police and others is routine but unreported by women, for fear of the consequences (loss of employment, violence). Mines, Minerals and People\(^2\) (2003) pointed out that in Orissa, women are forced to work at night and are exposed to the exploitation, physical and sexual, of the mine-owners, contractors and other men so much so that young girls from these regions are branded as ‘spoilt’ and not respectable for marriage. Because of this sexual humiliation the women mine workers are vulnerable to diseases like HIV, AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. There is a growing situation of unwed women as mothers, deserted women who are further humiliated and forced into giving in to the demands of the males in order to retain their wage labour in he mines and to bring up their offsprings.

Rekha Pande\(^2\) (2008) pointed out that the harsh physical conditions of the bangle and *agarbatti* trades, the social environment, long hours, and the general stresses and strains of poverty all affect women’s health adversely. In spite of their ill-health and their aversion to the work, they believed they had no option but to continue in these trades.

Usha\(^2\) observed that many women are exploited by the fellow male workers, owners as well as by the customers. The women are not ready to complain with any of the formal bodies since they may lose their job due to this complaint. They feel that any of their colleagues or their friends and family members will not support them in such a critical situation. So, they do not lodge complaint in any of the available forums. It is reported that some of them leave the job due to the exploitative behaviour of the
shopowner and join another shop with much lower wage. If some customers go without buying from the shop that blame falls upon the woman in-charge whereas if the business goes very well no credit is given to her. She is never considered as a potential worker.

Social Security Provisions for Women Workers

The basic idea of social security is to use social means to prevent deprivation and vulnerability to deprivation. Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen (2002) distinguish between two aspects of social security: ‘protection’ and ‘promotion’. The former is concerned with preventing a decline in living standards in general and in the basic conditions of living in particular. The latter has the objective of enhancing normal living conditions and helping people overcome regular and persistent deprivation.

Women workers in the unorganised sector have little or no social security. Absence of protection against occupational and health hazards is creating vulnerable situations for women workers in the unorganised sector.

Unorganised workers in India face three major threats to human security: poor health, shrinking livelihoods and muted voice. Health is among the leading causes of both impoverishment and vulnerability of workers in the unorganised sector.

Many laws have been provided to ensure a safe and healthy working environment for the female workers – the Trade Union Act (1926), the Minimum Wages Act (1948), the Maternity Benefits Act (1961), etc. The most recent is the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act of 2008, which provides benefits to workers registered with the District Administration, including some health insurance and maternity benefits. Despite these laws, health and health services remain disheartening.

Chatterjee and Macwan (1988) revealed that agarbatti workers are especially vulnerable to postural and locomotive system problems due to highly confined and repetitious nature of their work as well as to skin problems due to exposure to phthalic acid esters used in the production of agarbattis. They found a number of health problems among women engaged in agarbatti and masala making in Ahmedabad including back pain, blisters on hands, bodyache, chest pain, dizziness and exhaustion, eye problems, headache, nausea, neck pain, pain in abdomen, pain in limbs, shoulder pain, white discharge, heavy bleeding, early periods, drying of breast milk and itching or burning while urinating. In such kind of health conditions no protective or preventive measures were taken by the agarbatti workers as it hampers speed and hence earnings.

Deshingkar (2009) studied that a number of trade unions across the country continue to fight for the rights of construction workers. Self Employed Women’s
Association (SEWA) has succeeded in extending social security coverage to many women workers in informal occupations, and has engaged in collective bargaining with employers.

According to Roy Chowdhury34 (2005), where women’s rights organisations have been involved in campaigns more tangible results have been attained. In Bangalore, for example, intervention by the National Women’s Commission (NWC) resulted in improved toilet facilities, a limit on working hours and reduced harassment by the management.

As per the health conditions of women workers in mines they suffer from several occupational illnesses right from respiratory problems, silicosis, tuberculosis, leukemia, arthritis to reproductive problems. They work with toxic and hazardous substances without any safety. When they leave the mines, they have no pensions or provident funds given by the companies. On the other hand, at the time of dropping out of work they are left with heavy debts due to repeated illnesses, medical expenses, unpaid holidays taken due to sickness, other domestic expenses which overshoot their incomes due to the low wages earned, etc. In order to pay up, they introduce their minor children into the mine workforce, thereby getting tangled into the vicious trap of unending mine labour for the next generations.35

Although a number of schemes have been introduced. Only about 6 per cent of the unorganised workers in the country are covered under any of the social security measures. It is further estimated that small and large NGOs in the country provide some social security cover to about 2 per cent of the workforce in the unorganised sector. The historical experience suggests that there is hardly any effective alternative to the role of the state in providing a modicum of social security, especially to the poorer sections of the population.36

Thus, the position of women workers in unorganised sector today remains as it was in the past, in spite of increasing number of legislations, committees and comissions and study groups for their benefits, there seems to be no impact of the constitutional provisions regarding equality on the social and economic life of women in our country. Legislations enacted during the last three decades are out of reach for most women workers because by and large they have neither the mental awareness nor financial resources to take advantage of these provisions. And so, protective legislations boomerang to their disadvantage. Therefore, there is need for an integrated approach of
all the agencies presently engaged in human resource development in the unorganised sector.

Central and State Governments though framed several rules and enacted legislations to combat the exploitative force but the irony of the fact is that there has been staggering gulf between framing rules, enacting legislations and their effective implementation. There is a plethora of law for the protection of the working women which regulate hours of work, provide safety measures and well being of female labourers. But even then conditions of 95 per cent of the working women in field, mines and construction sites, cottage and household activities are even worse.\(^{37}\)

NCEUS\(^{38}\) (2007) has mentioned that there are lack of comprehensive and appropriate regulation in India; and even where regulations exist, there is inadequate and ineffective implementation mechanisms.

Aforementioned studies reveal that the women workers in the unorganised sector face the problems of sex discrimination at the workplace, wage discrimination, poor working conditions, dual work burden, lack of training, education and skill, job insecurity, low wages, health problems and so on, which are most common. The improvement in the conditions of livelihood of the women workers depends not only on their own agency, but also on a policy and a regulatory framework as well as programmes, which create the conditions, which allow them to expand their livelihoods. The main responsibility for creating such conditions rests with the state, although other stakeholders also have an important role to play.
References

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