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Women in unorganized sector - Problems & issues in India

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Abstract

The relation between nation's prosperity and women condition can be understood by the famous quote given by Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, "You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women."

India is a traditional country and there is diversity in religions, culture and customs. Role of the women in India mostly is household and limited to domestic issues. Female workers form the largest segment of India's unorganized workforce. Majority of women work in unorganized sectors for low wages due to low level of skills, illiteracy, ignorance and surplus labour and thus face high level of exploitation. The social and economic profile of female worker is greatly affected by the nature of industrial sector where they work.

Keywords: Unorganized sector, women worker

Introduction

"Empowering Women is a prerequisite for creating a good nation, when women are empowered, society with stability is assured. Empowerment of women is essential as their value systems lead to the development of a good family, good society and ultimately good nation" – Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam

The National Commission for Women estimates that 94 percent of the total female workforce is to be found in the unorganized sector. The presence of a vast multitude of women as workers and producers in the unorganized sector, where earnings are low, employment seasonal and insecure, supportive services woefully inadequate or even nonexistent, growth opportunities few and collective organization weak, has brought into sharp focus the failure of the mainstream to alleviate their predicament. While it is true that workers, irrespective of sex, are exploited in the unorganized sector, women suffer more by the fact of their gender. The changing patterns of economic development in the liberalization era have put a heavy burden on women, which is reflected in their health status. The small farmers, landlessness, forced migration both temporary and permanent, have undoubtedly affected women's health, nutritional and emotional status. The growth of small and cottage industries has depended heavily on female labour. Women work in industries like tanning, tobacco, cashew, coir, textiles, garment, fish processing and canning, construction and domestic work, etc. In all these industries, they toil long hours at low paid, skilled or unskilled workers. As a result they face serious health problems related to work place, hazards of pollutants on women who work during adolescence, and pregnancy have serious consequences on women. Women work the most; paradoxically they earn the least in life. The additional social responsibility shouldered by them, their subordinate status in society, patriarchal family set up, socio-economic backwardness, proneness for occupation in the unorganized sector with low productivity and marginalization in employment opportunities account for their poor or low earning skills, illiteracy, ignorance and surplus labour and thus face high level of exploitation. This hampers their bargaining power for higher wages and any opportunities for further development.

Definition of unorganized sector

Although, it is difficult to give a concise and holistic definition of unorganized labour. Unorganized labour stands for scattered and fragmented workforces working individually

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sometimes loosely associated, in various occupations. Unorganized labour is not formally cohesive in any recognized association and union with defined ideology, goals and areas of specialization. The unorganized sector of the economy in India is the largest sector in term of employment of the workforce. It consists of agriculture and such related activities as forestry, livestock and fishing as well as non-agriculture. The bill of National Commission for Enterprises in the unorganized sector, 2006 presented by the government of India, broadly divided the works of unorganized sector into self-employment and wage workers.

Women in unorganized sector

The term unorganized sector was first used by Hart in 1971 who described the unorganized sector as that part of urban labour force, which falls outside the organized labour market. In the unorganized sector, work situations are not in official record and working conditions are not protected by law. So the problems of female workers in unorganized sector are not properly known. It has been pointed out by Hart that one of the major problems is that working conditions are worst. Due to population growth and urban migration, the active labour force was growing at a much faster rate than availability of jobs in the organized sector. The focus of development policies was gradually shifting from pure economic to growth with equity and the eradication of poverty. Interest was, thus generated in sectors outside the organized economy that was providing a livelihood to a large section of the poor. Hence, the concept of the unorganized sector was born. In defining the unorganized sector, self-employed with or without family labour and microenterprises with less than five workers, is also included.

Research design

In this study exploratory approach has been adopted and data are collected from secondary sources such as: published research articles, books, reports, Indian statistical report and literature available in website.

Objectives

The study has been undertaken with the following main objectives:

- To analyze the problem faced by women workers in unorganized sector.
- To define the different categories of women workers in India.
- To suggest measures for overcoming the problems of women workers in unorganized sector.

Hypothesis

- The condition of female workers is poor in terms of work force participation, working conditions and level of exploitation.
- The reason of poor condition of female workers can be attributed to economic necessity and technological advancement.

Condition of Female Workers

The International Labour Organization says that women represent:

- 50% of the population
- 30% of the labour force
- Perform 60% of all working hours

- Receive 10% of the world's income
- Own less than 1% of the world's property.

As per a report by International Labour Organization released on the International Women's Day on March 8, 2007, it is depicted that though the status of a working woman does not surprise many, there is surprisingly a significant gender inequality in terms of wages, job security, etc. In all the regions women either work for poor wages or are unpaid contributing members of the family. In South Asia, India and Bhutan rank 108th and 131st among 189 countries as far as percentage of women lawmakers in the lower house of parliament in 2006 is concerned.

Review of literature

The literature review shows that more focus is on married working women than on unmarried working women. It is also seen that focus is more on organized sector rather than unorganized sector of working women advocates for more facilities to women in the workplace, suggesting that "it is an important part of developmental strategy as well as an act of social justice" The World Bank (1991) estimates that Indian women make up one-third of essential for economic development and population planning."

Saradmoni (1995) ^[9] state that women workers are exposed more to the risk of sexual harassment and exploitation. Breman (1985) ^[2] reports women workers often have to work till the last stage of pregnancy and have to resume work soon after child birth exposing themselves and the child to considerable danger.

Rao and Suryanarayana (2013) ^[8] consider that with the entry of younger women in the export processing zones, market segmentation is being accentuated; female dominated jobs are being devalued, degraded and least paid. Though this does not augur well for women development, it has not deterred women from contributing to family survival, and studies do not want which highlight that it is women who settle down in the labour market as flower/ fruit vendors, domestic servants and allow the men to find suitable job leisurely or improve their skill.

Categories of women workers in unorganized sector

1. **Rag pickers:** Rag picker is a person who salvages reusable or recyclable materials thrown away by others to sell or for personal consumption. There are millions of waste pickers worldwide, predominantly in developing countries. The global population of urban dwellers is expected to double between 1987 and 2015, with 90% of this growth occurring in developing countries. The United Habitat Report found that nearly one billion people worldwide live in slums, about a third of the world's urban dwellers.
2. **Domestic workers:** In 1977-78, there were some 1.68 million female domestic workers, while the number of male workers was only 0.62 million. A study of domestic workers in Delhi (Neetha 2004) ^[8] shows that although domestic work has brought higher incomes to many women and their families it is still far from decent work being characterized by long working hours, low wages and hardly any social security. Domestic workers are more vulnerable than other kinds of workers because they are not officially classified as workers at all and are therefore not covered by laws that apply to workers.

3. **Coolies:** Women coolies basically do the job of loading/unloading of packages being received at railway stations to warehouses and from warehouses/go downs to further distribution centers.
4. **Vendors:** This is the most scattered category, which includes women engaged in selling different types of commodities, like broomsticks, cane baskets, utensils, petty cosmetics, bangles, vegetables and those running roadside tea stalls, etc. Nearly 40% of total vendors are women and 30% of these women are the sole earning members in their families.
5. **Beauticians:** A large number of women are employed as beauticians. A large portion of the beauty saloons/parlours fall under the unorganized sector and are characterized by informal employment. According to a study on Human Resource and Skill Requirements in the Unorganized Sector: mapping of human resource skill gaps in India till 2022 carried out by National Skill Development Corporation, Mumbai, the demand for personal care/ body care would drive the demand for beauticians.
6. **Construction labourers:** The construction industry provides direct employment to at least 30 million workers in India (but recent expansions has resulted in a higher number: trade unions estimate that there were roughly 40 million migrant construction workers in India in 2008. Women work mainly as unskilled workers.
7. **Garment workers:** The garment industry is a sub-sector of the textile industry and also generates many jobs for migrant workers. India's readymade garment exports increased significantly as a share of total exports (12% or Rs 254780 million in 2001-02). The women work as helpers to male/female tailors (called as masters). These workers include those involved in knitting clothes/woolens.
6. **Extreme work pressure:** Female are overworked, they work twice as many hours as worked by their male counterpart. In agriculture sector the condition is the worst. When measured in terms of number of tasks performed and the total time spent, it is greater than men as per one study in Himalayas which found that on a one-hectare farm, a pair of bullocks' works 1064 hours, a man 1212 hours and a woman 3485 hours in a year.
7. **Irregular wages payment:** There is lack of controlled processes in unorganized sector which results in to untimely payment of wages to the workers. When it comes to payment to female, it is even worst.
8. **Wage discrimination:** Female do not get similar payment to the male for same work.
9. **Seasonal employment:** Many of the unorganized sector industries are seasonal. These industries includes fruits processing, pickle making, agricultural sector, construction sector etc. They have to fetch another employment when there is no work during offseason.
10. **Physical problems:** The working conditions are not healthy. Work place is not ergonomically designed. This results into workers facing fatigue resulting physical problems. Female workers are mostly on such tasks where they need to remain in one position such as agriculture. This results on to saviour problems such as backache and knee-ach.

Problems of women in unorganized sector

A large number of women from rural areas migrate to cities and towns all over India. Most of these women and girls are illiterate and unskilled. They work in inhuman conditions in cities as their living standard is extremely poor. It is a recognized fact that there is still no society in the world in which women workers enjoy the same opportunities as men. According to the 2001 census about 96% of women workers in India are in unorganized sector. The women unorganized sector are facing so many problems:

1. **Lack of education:** Illiteracy is the biggest problem because they do not get time to educate themselves. In childhood, they have to start working early which do not allow them to go school.
2. **Insufficient skill & knowledge:** Majority of female do not have proper training and skills aligned to their task. This result is excessive stress and inefficient working.
3. **Exploitation of the female labour:** Female worker are more vulnerable to exploitation by employer. They can be easily threatened of their job for indecent favours.
4. **Insecure job:** Absence of strong legislation controlling the unorganized sector makes the job highly insecure in this sector.
5. **Non sympathetic attitude of employer:** Temporary nature of employment in this sector does not allow the bond between the employee and employer to establish and become strong.

Suggestions

- Since women workers lack in skill, skill development programs should be provided to them to enhance their skill level.
- Women workers should be educated and make them aware about their rights and legislative provisions.
- It is very much essential to create awareness among women workers about the institutional support available to them to protect their rights.
- A comprehensive law is needed to protect the rights of women workers.
- Any kind of exploitation including sexual harassment of women workers is to be prevented and stringent action needs to be taken against the wrong doer.
- Mass media should be used to communicate the social message relating to women equality.
- A separate women grievance cell headed by a woman should be established in every organization sector and in case of unorganized sector women to form self-help groups for their protection.
- Necessary amendments are required to be made in labour laws.
- There should be proper regulation of unorganized sector industries, which ensure job security, healthy work environment and at least minimum wages, maternity and child care benefits.

Conclusion

The unorganized sector is larger in rural areas as compared to urban areas. The female participation in this sector is more than male. Women worker face grave problems. Their condition is highly unpredictable and have constraints related to their work such as insecurity, wage discrimination, absence of medical and accidental care, lack of continuity etc. this is due to their seasonal intermittent nature of work, low level irregular patterns of earning and

employment, absence of employer-employee relationship and weak administrative structure. It is also clear that self-awareness and education are the magic wands which will fuel the revolution.

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