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MAJOR PROBLEMS FACED BY THE UNORGANIZED WOMEN WORKERS IN INDIA - AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT:

The unorganized sector of the economy in India is the largest sector in terms 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, Women are still far behind in the actual distribution of social status, economic value and political authority. Women contributes almost half (49.7 per cent) of the global total population. The actual participation of women in all spheres of human interactions has been extremely poor.

KEYWORDS: Major Problems Faced, Women Workers, consists of agriculture .

INTRODUCTION

Similarly one of the two main tasks entrusted to our Commission is to propose umbrella legislation for workers in the unorganized sector. We have also been asked to see that the legislation, and the system that will be built around it, will assure at least a minimum protection and welfare to workers in the unorganized sector. With this background, the present paper seeks to examine the following:

1. Conditions of unorganized women workers
2. Problems faced by the unorganized women workers
3. To suggest the policy prescription

CONDITIONS OF UNORGANIZED WOMEN WORKERS

According to NSSO Survey of 1990-2000, in India there are 406 million working population. Almost 92 per cent of this workforce is in the unorganized sector. There are numerous occupational groups pursuing economic activities from generation to generation without formal schooling and scattered all over the country with diffused employer-employee relationship.

The occupation wise distribution of employment indicates that 62 per cent of the workers are engaged in agriculture, 11 per cent in industry and 27 per cent in the services sector. A characteristic feature of the employment situation in the country is that the percentage of workers employed on regular salaried employment 16 per cent is small. The bulk of the workforce is either self-employed 53 per cent are employed in casual wage employment 31 per cent.

The International Labour Organization says that women represent:

- I. 50% of the population

- ii. 30% of the labour force
- iii. Perform 60% of all working hours
- iv. Receive 10% of the world's income
- v. Own less than 1% of the world's property

As per the report of International Labour Organization released on the International Women's Day, 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 ranked 108th and 131st among 189 countries as far as percentage of women lawmakers in the lower house of parliament in 2006 is concerned.

Women account for 32% of the workforce in the informal economy, including agriculture and 20% of the non-agricultural workforce. 118 million women workers are engaged in the unorganized sector in India, constituting 97% of the total women workers in India. The informal sector in the non-agriculture segment alone engaged 27 million women workers in India. Work participation rate is found to be higher among rural women (27%) than the urban women (10%).

In the unorganized sector women are overworked, women's work is invisible, unrecognized and unremunerated, women are displaced by men due to the impact of technology, high incidence of physical and sexual exploitation of women.

In a study conducted by the International Labour Organization about four decades back it could be established that 27 out of 100 women were found to be economically active and about one-third of the world's labour force comprised of women. At the same time, it was also highlighted that participation of the women in economic activity varies considerably from one region to another due to varying economic, social and cultural conditions prevailing in each region. It was well established that the rate of participation by women in economic life varies from a maximum of more than 40 per cent in Eastern Europe and the USSR where women constitute more than two-fifths of the total workforce on the one hand to that of a minimum of less than 15 per cent in Latin America where women could constitute only one-fifth of the total labour force. At the same time participation of women in labour force was also found to be high in Western Europe where women comprised one-third of the economically active population and most of them were found to be gainfully employed in all age groups. In some of the developed countries like Denmark, Germany, Japan, Australia, etc. a major part of women labour force is engaged in agriculture and their participation is also high in non-agricultural activities. And on the whole overall rate of participation of women labour force in these countries tends to be higher as compared to other developed countries. It has been observed with regard to developing countries that one group of countries, namely, Haiti, Nepal, Thailand etc., rate of women participation in economic life exceeds 40 per cent of the total female population while in other group of countries, namely India, Malaya, Morocco, Tunisia, etc, the rate of women's participation is comparatively less in the range of 30 to 40 per cent of the total agricultural workforce and between 20 to 25 per cent of the total female population.

In most of the developing countries wide spread unemployment and under-employment pose varied problems for the working women. In order to understand diversity involved in this regard it becomes imperative to study each specific case in the context of existing plan and the complexities involved in respect of prevailing unemployment and underemployment among the women workers. Leaving apart agriculture, in other sectors of employment the women workers have to face the competition with the men workers and due to that the women workers are deprived of work opportunities, particularly, in the modernized industries and at the same time mechanization of small industries has also resulted in replacement of women workers by their male counterparts and due to these reasons majority of the women workers continue to get employment in rural sectors of employment.

Women work mainly for economic independence, for economic necessity, as some women are qualified enough to work, for a sense of achievement and to provide service to the society. Most Indian women by and large undertake "productive work" only under economic compulsion. This is the reason for high female

participation rates in economically under privileged communities.

Most of the women are found to be employed in agricultural activities and in the 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 etc. An estimate by the World Bank shows that 90% of the 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 do not provide benefits to the workers. Statistics show that vast majority of Indians work in Agriculture where 55% of the population is female agricultural workers and 30% of the men are labourers and not cultivators.

PROBLEMS OF THE UNORGANISED WOMEN WORKERS

Wage Discrimination

Most women work whether, they are paid or unpaid. Women do a lot of unpaid work within the household, in family farms and enterprises. Despite its obvious economic and social worth, much of the work that women do remains 'invisible' in national accounting and censuses and even while defining the 'informal sector' and assessing its contribution to the GDP.

Estimates based on the National Sample Survey (NSS) 1999-2000, women are said to account for one-third, about 400 million, of the unorganized sector workers in India. These figures would be much larger if the unpaid work done by most women is recognized and included, even then, they have not been considered equal to man in practice from the ancient times. It is a fact that discrimination against women is widely prevalent in India. Despite their contribution in primary sector, they are not viewed as being within the productive system. Most of the women work in unorganized sector for low wages because of illiteracy, ignorance, low level of skills etc., and these factors hamper them to bargain for increase in wages. Women workers are paid much less in comparison to men for doing the same work. They are also discriminated in entering into gainful employment in public and private sectors.

No Limit for Minimum Wages

In small manufacturing units, women are employed generally by the contractors and sub-contractors. The names of these women workers are not shown in the muster roll and thus, they are not treated as regular employees. As a result of this, they are not given wages and other benefits which the regular employees avail as per labour legislation. The women piece rate workers mostly work in their houses. They usually work under contractors. They contractor supply raw material to them and take finished goods.

In domestic service too, there is no minimum limit for wages. In the study area the wages of female domestic servants are determined on the basis of their contract with the employers depending upon the nature of jobs assigned to them. For domestic servants, minimum wages is an alien work. The wage of such women workers are not determined by any criteria. The wages for the same quantum of work varies from one household to the other. Thus, in the domestic sector, women workers are exposed to acute poverty. It can perhaps be said without fear of contradiction, that a large majority, perhaps a predominant majority of those engaged in this category of service are women and children. An estimate made by the College of Social Work in Bombay claims that 80 per cent of domestic workers are women.

Domestic work in the cities is seen as one avenue of employment by poor women from both rural and suburban areas. These women who work as domestic labour are part of an exploitative informal economy where they work without formal or informal enterprises/employers or by households and fall within the category of informal wage employment. The globalization has opened avenues for women in the informal sector, 'low wages, insecurities and complete lack of organizational strength have characterized the quality of their employment.

Long Hours of Work

In unorganized sector the hours of work are longer than permitted by law and no payment for overtime is made to the workers. Moreover, women put more hours of work than men but they earn much less than the

men.

In short, while women have begun to take on new roles in the workforce, once dominated by men, men have not taken on new roles in the household, till dominated, therefore, by women.

Lack of Health Facilities at Work Place

The manufacturing small-scale industries which employ women as casual labour provide unsatisfactory physical environment and surroundings at the place of work. The place of work generally lacks sufficient light, ventilation, pure water, separate toilets for women and men, proper sitting arrangements, cleanliness and required temperature and humidity etc. Thus, they are deprived of minimum facilities of work at work places. Due to unhygienic conditions of work, workers are exposed to several health hazards.

The government regulations provide for amenities at work place such as creches, sanitary services etc. But unfortunately, these facilities are not provided to women labourers. The working mothers are, therefore, compelled to leave their children uncared for at home. The women construction workers neither receive any accidental, medical or maternity benefits from their employers. Thus, there is a complete denial of welfare measures for these women workers.

Lack of Job Security

As the nature of employment of women workers employed in unorganized sector is casual or on daily wages or at piece rate, there is no job security for them. Almost all women in this sector face insecurity of jobs. Women working as domestic servants, sweepers, scavengers etc., face insecurity of jobs extremely. In some cases women generally lose jobs for about to six months in a year. Job insecurity is faced by women workers in sectors such as agriculture, small manufacturing units, construction work, domestic services etc. Self-employed women, who are part-time workers also lose jobs for a few months in a year.

Lack of Legislative Cover

There are no rules and regulations in the unorganized sector. Even the legal rights are ignored. The decentralization of work is done by small manufacturing units with a view to escape government legislation. The domestic woman workers do not have any legal terms and conditions of employment. These women workers do not get any sort of protection. Agriculture women workers also do not have legal protection in practice. The migrant women workers in unorganized sector without legal protection. Women construction workers have also been deprived from legislative cover. No protection is provided to these women from the atrocities of the contractors or sub-contractors.

Heavy Physical Work

Most of women workers in agriculture sector are given heavy physical work, which they do from early morning till late evening. The entire family work is also their responsibility. In small manufacturing units, women workers, in some cases, are assigned tough physical work as women labour is cheap. This keeps the cost of production of their products cheaper. In construction work the work of crushing stones and carrying the heavy loads are difficult physical work but these tasks are solely assigned to women workers. Domestic women workers are also given all types of manual jobs. Besides other heavy physical jobs, they are also engaged in clearing sewers but they are not equipped with protective overall masks.

Lack of Safe Working Places

For young girls and women coolies who work in unorganized sectors under hazardous conditions like building constructions, bricklins, agriculture fields, small cottage industries, truck loading and unloading, road side micro business, house and stall maids etc., have no security at their work spots.

There is no security for the lives of women in unorganized women sector. They are forced to work under odd and unsafe working places.

Lack of Social Security

In India, women constitute almost half of the total workforce. However, over 96 per cent of women work in the informal, unorganized sector. Overall, the informal sector constitutes 93 per cent of the workforce of the population of India. Moreover, these workers contribute 62 per cent to the gross domestic product (GDP), and 50 per cent to the national income. This sector includes workers employed in a wide range of economic activities, from street vendors and casual workers in a tea-shop to agricultural workers, small and marginal farmers to 'beedi' workers, construction workers, salt pan workers and sub-contracted and temporary workers of factories. However, unlike workers in the formal sectors, they do not have access to regular incomes or welfare benefits, making them extremely vulnerable to change and insecurity.

POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS

1. The government should be careful that the schemes and programmes reach the targeted groups. The education to working women should be provided according to their requirements and should simultaneously uplift their socio-economic awareness.
2. Since women workers lack in skill, skill development programmes should be provided to them to enhance their skill level.
3. The discrimination of women workers in wage payment and terms and conditions of work should be discarded. The principle of equal pay for equal work should be effectively enforced.
4. It is very much essential to create awareness among women workers about the institutional support available to them to protect their rights.
5. The women workers should be encouraged by the social workers to fight against their exploitation or harassment.
6. The provision of adequate facilities for the women workers at the workplace must be ensured.
7. The women workers should be ensured of limited working hours. They should also be given weekly rest with pay/wages, maternity benefits, regular holidays and medical facilities.
8. Last but not the least a separate women grievance cell headed by a women should be established in every organization employing women workers in the organized sector and in case of unorganized sector women to form self-help groups for their protection.

CONCLUSION

Articles 43 of the Constitution says, "The State shall endow to secure by suitable legislation or economic organization or any other way to all workers, agricultural, industrial or otherwise work, a living wage, ensuring a decent standard of life and full enjoyment of leisure and social and cultural opportunities.

In view of the aforesaid article of the Constitution, special laws have been enacted for the protection of women workers in factories, mines, plantation etc. In the early phase of country's planning, the concept of women development envisaged as welfare oriented. But later on women were recognized as participants of development. The concept of women development has further changed. Now, the planning has marked a shift from development to 'employment of women'. This change has emphasized that the women must be able to function as equal partners in the country's development process.

Undoubtedly, labour laws for women workers in India are amongst the most progressive in the world. But the economic, social and physical exploitation of women workers continues. Though the Central and State governments have framed various rules enacted legislation to combat exploitation but there has been a wide gap between framing rules, enacting legislation and their effective implementation. There are very strict laws for the protection of benefits of working women which provide safety measures and regulations for working hours and conditions of work and welfare of women workers. But even these rules and regulations have not been able to safeguard the interest of working women in agricultural works, small and household industries, construction work, domestic services and self 'employed sector'. The condition in these sectors is rather worse. Women workers under the adverse circumstances have to do strenuous work at very low wages and inhuman conditions of work without permanency of jobs.

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