

WOMEN EXPERIENCES IN INFORMAL WORK: INTERSECTION OF GENDER, SOCIAL HIERARCHY AND WORK

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Abstract

The present study aims at understanding the gendered experiences of women working in informal sector and the degree of vulnerabilities faced by them in unorganised sector by focusing on wage earners in a construction site. Discussion primarily focuses on the narratives of the women workers and their everyday experiences in work site through different subthemes covering their views on wage discrimination, worksite vulnerabilities, their socio-economic status and its impact on their work life.

Key Words: Informal Work, Women, Patriarchy, Capitalism, Social Hierarchy.

Introduction

With the process of globalization, Indian political economy has entered into a new phase under which global flows of capital, commodities, information and people are regulated. The process of globalization and new economic policy in India has created both new opportunities and new challenges for the working-class section of the society. The changes introduced in India since 1990s have also transformed the discourse of capitalism and the existing class dominance in the society. Dismantling of license regime, greater entry of foreign capital and opening up of different sectors such as infrastructure, transport, banking, information and technology etc. to private capital have enabled many new entrants into capitalist class. This has further led Indian economy to set up a more unorganized or informal sector. This is usually defined as a unit belonging to the informal sector which can be identified in terms of the small size of the enterprise, the small number of workers employed or relatively unregulated nature of business. Post Globalization of Indian economy is marked by huge set of informalisation, wide scale of informal economy and informal workers who remain mostly invisible. Indian

economy has dominance of informal and unorganized sector both in terms of number of workers and enterprises. The biggest challenge with the informal workers in India is the lack of adequate information about the total numbers of workers engaged in informal sector.

India initiated many important policy changes towards liberalization and privatization of its economy from the late 1980s onwards especially through structural adjustments policies (SAP). These SAPs opened India's economy to globalised world and has made it a part of private capital. With SAP the nature of the Indian economy and labour market changed drastically. The private sector expanded with the state withdrawing from welfare activities and giving away more power to private capital and market forces. These changes brought by SAP in the nature of work available and both in the quantity and quality of work, have had a strong impact on India's women workers (Agarwala, 2013). Accordingly SAP is one of the reasons for the increasing growth of informal sector and so-called unskilled work was hugely subcontracted and de-regularized. It has opened up another new phase in the integration of women workers into capitalist development in the history of India. Moreover, the expanded labour market has further provided the way to exploitation of women's labour with unequal payment and unjust policies. SAP has some positive impact on a small minority of educated and skilled women in paid work, while it has negative impact on the poorer, unskilled section of the majority of women workers. Like in many other developing countries, in India too, women's work participation rates (WPRs) not only declined but the work was also increasingly casualised.

Workforce can be categorized as - formal or organized sector and informal or unorganized sector. The 'organized sector' covers all public sector enterprises including Government and Semi-Government organizations. The organized sector is covered or protected by various laws and acts. The unorganized sector covers all the rest, mainly all the unincorporated enterprises and household industries (not covered under organized sector) which are not regulated by any legislation' (Agarwala, 2013). The informal growth of economy or the informalisation of economy is the calculative and strategic outcome of global capitalism. As Kalyan Sanyal has opined that globalization is leading to the economic marginalization of huge numbers of people in third world countries. These people are being confined to a space of informal survivalism (Sanyal, 2013).

The role of state is necessary to interpret, while discussing the nature of capitalist development in case of India. Corporatization of Indian state has declined the role of state and opened up some of the major sectors to market in the name of reform, development or modernization which again led to the emergence of vast section of marginalized and deprived section mostly from the informal sector. Informalisation of economy is the significant outcome of post colonial capital, which mostly signifies the vulnerability that is associated with the process of informalisation. An important aspect of quality of employment in India is the predominance of informal sector. The size of the organised sector characterised by higher earnings and job security is small, it accounted for less than 6% of the total employment in 2004-05 (Mohapatra, 2012). Over the years employment in organised sector has been declining and the faster growth of unorganised sector is seen particularly. As a result, there has been increasing informalisation of employment over the years. This informalisation has been more pronounced in case of female workers. About 96% of female employment is in unorganised sector as against 91% of males (Mohapatra, 2012). Indian economy has preponderance of informal and unorganised sector both in terms of workers and enterprises. The biggest problem with the informal sector in India is that there is no precise information about the total numbers of workers engaged in this sector. Moreover, the definition and percentage of unorganised sector are blurry and confusing. Most of the people working in unorganised sector are not covered under labour legislation and they have no protection in terms of employment. They are at the mercy of the employer.

In this process of informalisation of Indian economy, it is the women workers who are one of the most vulnerable sections of the labour force. Unequal wages, lack of welfare schemes and regulations, especially in the informal sector makes the condition of women informal workers most deplorable. With the further growth of new liberal economy, there is massive entry of women work force into both formal and informal economic process. However, it is significantly in the informal sector or in unorganised sector, that the participation of women is seen mostly. In respect to women's work, as Jayati Ghosh has mentioned certain paradoxes are seen in recent decades. With respect to women's work, there have been four apparently contradictory trends; simultaneous increase in women's paid work, underpaid labour, unpaid labour and the open unemployment of women (Ghosh, 2018). Another interpretation of the exploitation of women's work as feminisation of labour technically replacing the term 'sexual division of labour' emerged in the post-

globalised context. This phenomenon can be used particularly to describe the impact of globalisation on the role of state in the developing economies, withdrew from their responsibilities, particularly from welfare policies for the people in social sector. It refers to the rapid and substantial increase in the proportions of women in paid employment over the last two decades. The de-regularisation of labour markets, fragmentations of production process, de-industrialisation and new areas of export specialisation have all generated an increased demand for low-paid, flexible female labour force. It can be said that even though employment opportunities may have increased, but weak immobile labour class has been left at the mercy of mobile and powerful capital. Evidently bargaining power of the labour irrespective of gender is on decline.

Moreover, post-independent India witnessed a consistent decline in the agricultural sector production and gradual decline of rural economy. Majority of women workers were involved in these sectors and its decline naturally marginalised their existence. This has pushed the women to migrate and join the unorganised section of the economy and have turned them as informal workers involving in various activities which are devoid of getting any formal rules, safety or welfare provision regarding work. Women workers in the informal sector work as piece rate workers, self employed workers, paid workers in the informal enterprises, unpaid workers in the family business, casual workers without fixed employers and as wage-earners etc. India after 1990s has gradually opened itself up to the global economy, becoming part of the globalised world of private capital. The changes brought in the economy have also made a strong impact on women's work in terms of both quantity and quality. With the rise of informal sector, unskilled work has gradually become hugely sub-contracted and de-regularised. Therefore, the expanded labour market increasingly gave access to the exploitation of women's labour with unequal payment and unjust policies. Furthermore, since 1990s, Indian economy has been witnessing rise of casualisation or informalisation of women's paid work and decline of the participation of women workforce. India has recorded one of the lowest women workforce participation rates (WPRs) in the world in 2018-19 (Chakrabarty, 2020). Lack of any compulsion towards protective legislation or better welfare measures may also be working as an incentive in the contemporary time towards the inclusion of women workers in the informal sector and decline of women work in formal sector. Though labour market flexibility contributed to an increase in work opportunities for women, but huge number of women has entered into the

informal sector mostly under exploitative conditions with long working hours, low wages and no benefits (Sreerekha, 2017)

Objective of the Paper

The present study aims at understanding the gendered experiences of women working in informal economy in unorganised sector and the degree of vulnerabilities faced by the women workers by focusing on wage earners in a construction sites. Discussion is primarily focused on the narratives of the women workers and their everyday experiences in work site. Article aims to discuss their narratives through different subthemes covering their views on wage discrimination, worksite vulnerabilities, their socio-economic status and its impact on their work life.

Methodology

The present article is based on the findings of the narratives of the women informal workers of a private construction site in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. Present study has adopted purposive sampling and focused group discussion as the method to understand the issues affecting women informal workers of Assam. Focused group is primarily composed of 23 women workers. In order to understand their everyday experiences as an informal worker, they were given open ended questions. Therefore, particular emphasis is laid on the in- depth interviews conducted among women of varied age group. However, in view of the research ethics the names of the respondents have been changed to maintain anonymity and analysis of the different themes mentioned in the article are based on the excerpts from the interview conducted with the focused group.

Analysis and discussion

This part of the paper deals with the narratives drawn from the discussion with women working in informal sector. The experiences of the workers covering from wage structure and discrimination, vulnerabilities at workplace, social status and its implication on work life, public-private dichotomy, identity through work, views on state responses towards informal workers are also covered. These issues have been presented below to highlight the experiences of the women workers and their narratives are discussed in different themes and contents.

Different experiences of informality

Women working in informal economy or the wage earners are located at the bottom of the class structure. They neither can control resources and means of production nor are they skilled labour. They are mostly unskilled and don't have any formal contracts with an employer rather their working patterns are irregular and insecure. Their insecurities make them vulnerable to exploitation. Working in the informal sector leaves women in a dismal situation that too; they not only work for lower wages but also work at lower wages than men. There are gender inequities in terms of wage structure in case of informal sector. Renuka one of the informal workers has informed the wage discrimination they are facing in the worksite. Men are getting Rs.350 per day whereas the women are getting only Rs.250 per day. Despite working for similar hours or for equal work they are receiving unequal pay. Gender inequalities or the pay disparities cannot be understood without interpreting the structural hierarchy in the form of patriarchy which subjugates women's rights and issues since decades. Disparity in wage structure is noticeable not only in case of men and women but also in terms of women of two different communities. In the construction site it has been noticed that, two groups of women were engaged as construction workers. Out of 23 women, 14 women are adivasi and 9 women belong to Karbi tribal community of Assam. One women section belongs to Adivasis and other section of women identifies themselves as Karbi tribal community. Women belonging to the Karbi tribe is getting Rs 300 wage per day and whereas women belonging to the adivasi of Assam are receiving Rs 250 per day. Women belonging to the adivasi of Assam are facing double subjugation, because of their socio-economically marginalized status.

Adivasis of Assam are mostly associated in the tea plantation and who were brought into Assam during colonial period by the British Government from different parts of India. Since colonial days their socio-economic status has not changed much. It is predominantly characterized by low wages in tea plantations, poor living condition and marginalized status socially, economically and politically. Being women members of this community, they face multiple socio-economic discrimination. *"We Adivasis suffered a lot, whether it is in society or in working site we always suffered. Nobody is concern of our sufferings,"* narrated by Radhika, an adivasi worker. Women are not only in disadvantageous position while getting their wages in terms of men but even within the women group itself the employers discriminate

because of their social and ethnic status. Karbi tribe is one of the indigenous ethnic groups of Assam which is socially, culturally, economically and most importantly politically in a superior status than the adivasi of Assam. Historic subjugation of since colonial period makes the women of the Adivasis to face continuous discrimination. This asymmetric treatment while determining the wages of adivasi and Karbi women have indicated the disadvantageous position of adivasi women in terms of income, autonomy of bargaining power and of rights. Adivasi women working in the construction site are basically temporary workers in nearby tea estates of Golaghat District of Assam. Tea plantation usually recruits temporary / casual and permanent workers based on the requirement of the garden. Adivasi women workers have also compared their experiences working as workers in tea gardens of Assam and as wage earner in the construction site. *“We prefer to work in tea gardens of Assam, because in tea gardens we seldom have to ask for our wages, here we have to wait for more than one week, sometimes one month to get our wages,”* said Bohagi. *“We are getting only Rs 250 per day that too after many days, it makes our lives hard. I have two children and my husband passed away, so not getting wages regularly have further pushed our family to more marginalized state,”* said Junti, another adivasi woman. Multiplicity of problems for the marginalized women is frustrating. Poverty has been experienced by both men and women. According to Whitehead, “men and women are often poor for different reasons, experience poverty differently and have different capabilities to withstand and or escape poverty” (Dubey, 2016) The intersection of gender and poverty plays a different role than poverty in general. Moreover Pineda-Ofrendo and Acosta also pointed that, “poorer the household, the longer women work” (Ibid) It is relatable to the condition of the adivasi poor women; they have to work for longer duration and cannot even bargain with the employer for getting their rights and wages. The financially weak conditions of these women make them vulnerable and exploitable. Women as subaltern are the most miserable of all oppressive sections. It becomes a lethal combination for the subaltern to be a woman. Patriarchal power structure, socially disadvantaged status and exploitative working condition are the significant pressure experienced by the adivasi women informal workers.

In comparison to adivasi women, Karbi women are in better position in terms of their family income, education and social status. Rubi Teronpi a Karbi women informal worker was matriculated and her children are doing graduation now. Moreover, her family has other source of income such as agriculture land, so they do not need to worry much about their economic

condition. *“I am working here, but it is my choice to work here, not compulsion, and my husband is also working,”* said Julia Engtipi. *“We are working here, because this site is in Karbi Anglong and its near to us, moreover currently it is lean agricultural season, so we prefer to work here,”* said Lolita Hansepi. However, Karbi tribal community are in an advantageous position, as they have their own land for cultivation and other source of earning such as poultry farming etc. Therefore, compared to adivasi women who are educationally and economically backward, Karbi women are enjoying relatively better position in the society. Their social status has also impacted on their working site. During the conversations with the two groups of women workers it has come to notice that employer has given Rs. 300 to Karbi women and Adivasi women are getting Rs. 250, despite performing the same work. This discrimination itself shows the underlying intersection of caste, class hierarchy and gender with that of the economic rights of the women working in informal economy in their worksite.

Vulnerabilities at work place

Women’s occupation in the informal sector faces double exploitation. On the one hand they belong to ‘a marginal mass’ who do not have any kind of social security or labour guarantees. On the other hand, they are exploited as a subordinated sex. The abuse of workers in the informal sector in jobs that include home-based workers, street vendors, domestic workers, waste pickers and manual workers in the construction and agriculture industries have been a global problem for decades. Women informal workers in the present study also have narrated their sense of insecurities and vulnerabilities that they are experiencing constantly in the work site. *“Many times, the male person mostly the employer and his friends try to pass certain unacceptable sexist comments, which we either ignore or avoid during our work time,”* said Malini an adivasi woman worker. *“I hate coming and talking to these people. Most of the time they annoy me by asking to get married with them and give proposal to go with them. I avoid them, I have no option, I can neither complaint it to anybody else nor I have a choice,”* said Radhika, another adivasi woman. In view of lack of other resources and opportunities for earning income, these women have been suffering sexual abuses silently. Sexual harassment at workplace adds another layer to the endless list of challenges that these women working in informal economy are facing apart from fighting against patriarchal and structural discrimination in the society. Similar asymmetrical working environment is seen in case of adivasi women. When they are asked about the sexual abuses

and violence in the workplace the Karbi informal workers have mentioned that they have not faced any unwanted situation. *"We are being treated very nicely by the employer, in fact sometimes they offer lunches to us,"* said by Bare Hansepi. These two contradictory views represent two different treatments meted towards the two groups of women in the same working place. Owing to the community-based discrimination which are also reflected in case of different degree of behavior received by the women shows undeniable social context in which women working in informal economy survive.

Intersection of patriarchy and capitalism: Reinforcing women oppression

Women have occupied diverse class positions under different material conditions and systems. Therefore, historical interpretations of women's contribution to economy in general would have to be related to their specific positions in the systems of productions and social relations. Women have to be perceived, not merely in terms of labour but also in terms of their relation to men, children and other women, both within and outside the family (Deka, 2013). Moreover, subordination of women informal workers can be seen in terms of domination of capitalism and patriarchy. Patriarchy and capitalism as distinct systems of domination interact with each other. Capitalism divides populations into classes based on their relationship to the means of production. The primary mechanism of exploitation is profiting off labour value. Patriarchy, in turn, divides populations into sexual subjects based on gendered constructs. The primary mechanism of exploitation is control over sexuality and social constructions of gender. The social relationship reproducing patriarchy is intimate interdependence (within household and family) (Agarwala, 2013). Construction work has long been acknowledged for its contributions to GDP and employment, and construction workers are predominantly male. Although construction work is generally considered "of worth," female construction workers are not. Moreover, the issues of construction women workers such as uneven and unequal pay, sexual harassment, access to sanitation and drinking water etc are some of the issues which never get any consideration and importance. The Marxist explanation of the origins of women's subordination is linked to an accumulation of wealth, the introduction of private property and subsequent control of women's sexuality and reproduction to ensure property inheritance (Beneria, 2017). The Marxist explanation of the historical interpretation of women subordination is also equally relevant in case of the oppression of

women informal workers in the post colonial capitalist sphere. Here the women informal workers not just have to fight against the capitalist accumulation of wealth by contributing their labour through exploitative labour regimes and oppressive working conditions without having any social and other welfare legislation. Therefore, new capitalist economy led to an accumulation of wealth and private property with marked class and gender differences.

It is noticeable from the narratives of the women informal workers and how they have been differentiated and discriminated in case of wages. Here not only gendered discrimination but also structural differences in the society which creates social hierarchy also become the cause of the marginalization of the women informal workers. The concept of 'Public Patriarchy' of Sylvia Walby is significant in terms of understanding the patriarchal norms of work for women informal workers both in family and public space; and they have been discriminated and exploited in both the domains. Sylvia Walby has used this concept of 'Public Patriarchy' in 'Theorising Patriarchy', where she uses the term with reference to economic sex discrimination motivated by the demand of capitalism in developed nations. Women informal workers have been struggling not for the bare minimum wages they are receiving for whole day long equal work with men, but also suffering in terms of accessing proper sanitation facilities which impact their privacy. *"Man can openly defecate in any space, but we women have to go to safer place for defecation, sometimes we move to nearby forest area for defecation,"* said Meena an informal worker. She also said *"Not having proper sanitation facilities at the worksite, makes us ill, because during our periods, we have to be more conscious of sanitation facilities."* The problems of accessing proper sanitation and water facilities reinforce the burden of women informal workers, which men workers seldom suffer. Lack of proper sanitation facilities for women informal workers in the worksites are the gross negligence of women's fundamental rights to access sanitation facilities. Apart from these, gendered division of work in family creates double burden for women workers. Women's reproductive work never gets proper acknowledgment. *"We are not only doing work outside but we also work at home. More than men, it is the women who do work"* said Junti, an adivasi women worker. *"I reach home at 6.30 pm in the evening, then I have to do all the household work. In my family me and my mother perform all the household work. I can only go to bed only at night and night seems to be short for me, because just after some hours another hectic morning begins,"* said Bohagi. In addition of being a laborious

worker in the construction site, women have to perform all the domestic unpaid labour, which often cut down their leisure and rest time. Therefore, it can be said they neither get acknowledgement for their significant role in informal works nor their unpaid reproductive work are recognized.

Informal work and formal politics

As it has been discussed above that capitalist accumulation in the modern economy has always relied on the labour of formal and informal workers. Unlike with formal workers, however, informal workers' relationship to capitalists remains tenuous. Employers are not obligated to pay informal workers minimum wages, and they can hire and fire informal labour according to market needs. Although some informal workers' unions are fighting for minimum wages, the shifting structures of production have undermined their bargaining power vis-à-vis employers. In the last few years Government of India has been introducing different measures for formalizing the Indian economy through introducing Goods and Service Tax, digitalization of financial transactions and enrollment of informal workers on government portals such as E-Shram. Despite all such measures for formalizing the Indian economy, the challenge of informality is still there. Huge sections of informal workers are outside of the any formal mechanisms of getting social security schemes. Covid-19 Pandemic has reflected the plight of the informal workers generally and migrant workers particularly. Lack of any social security measures for these informal workers has made them vulnerable. Launched in 2021 e-Shram aims at registration of unorganized workers such as construction workers, migrant workforce, street vendors and domestic workers among others etc. The objective of this portal is to provide welfare schemes to unorganized workers in the country. While asking the women workers about the registration in the web portal, it is found that all of them are ignorant about these provisions. *"We neither have any time left to go for registrations, nor we have any unions for claiming our rights,"* said Basudha Tanti, an adivasi woman worker. Job pattern of these casual workers are not stable, as they frequently change their job sites based on their needs; and these unorganized worksites have no mechanisms to provide welfare measures to them. Moreover, while asking one of the contractors about the unequal wages paid to adivasi women section in comparison to Karbi women, no direct answer was received from them. They showed no interest in giving answer to that question. *"We try to provide equal wages to all, but as the construction site is in Karbi Anglong so we give comparatively high*

wages to Karbi women than adivasis," said Babulal Singh, the contractor of the site. Location of the construction site in their district can also be cited as privilege for the Karbi women in terms of receiving higher wages than the adivasi women. Apart from superior socio, economic and political status of Karbi tribal women, the location of the worksite in their native district gives them advantageous position than the adivasi women who are looked down upon because of their historic disadvantageous position.

Therefore, it can be said that flexible regulations towards the fixations of wages for the informal workers creates a wage disparity not just between men and women but also between two different sections of women. From this finding, a conclusion can be drawn that gender, caste and class all three elements intersect with each other while analyzing the plight of the women working in informal economy. Global unregulated market mechanism guided by capital forces has reduced the bargaining power of women labour. Traditionally women workers have found themselves at even a greater disadvantageous position. This 'greater disadvantages' can be explained through a patriarchal structure, formed with the status of identities and their bearing on society. The bargaining power of lower caste, lower class women workers in this structure is much lesser in comparison to upper caste, and upper-class groups of women.

Concluding observation

Capitalist accumulation in the modern economy has always relied on labour of both formal and informal workers. Unlike with formal workers, however, informal workers' relationship to capitalists remains tenuous. Employers are not obligated to pay informal workers minimum wages, and they can hire and fire informal workers according to the needs of the market. Across the developing countries informal workers faces lot of challenges, on the other hand women as informal workers faces multiple disadvantages. The above study has raised the pertinent fact that women belong to the bottom of the social hierarchy, faces multiple difficulties-such as social discrimination, economic disadvantages, lack of occupation related security and gender related oppressions. Major findings related to the study is that the two groups of women-Adivasi women and Karbi tribal women experiences informality differently. In comparison to the Karbi tribal community, Adivasis are placed at the lower position in the social stratification. Their social positions led them to witness different forms of discriminations in the worksites such as-differential wages for similar work, vulnerabilities,

etc. More importantly despite their social differences, both the two groups of women are equally facing the disadvantages associated with the nature of the informality of their work. All of them have been facing low wages compared to men, job insecurities, exhaustion due to long working hours, exploitative workplace and burden of carrying out reproductive and household care work. The present study clearly projected both common and different experiences of being an informal worker. Therefore, mere creating regulations for transforming informal economy to formal economy will not certainly help informal workers, rather their access to basic welfare facilities such as equal pay for equal work, secured work places, hygiene and sanitation facilities, health, nutrition and education should be considered as their rights and providing them their rights should be the prime duty of the state.

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POLITICAL FUNDING AND THE ELECTORATE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE INDIAN POLITICAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

As said by American politician, Jesse Unruh “Money is the mother's milk of politics”, it is impossible to think of elections without financial resources in a country like India. The country from a one-party dominance till the 1960s to the formation of coalition governments and the increasing number of political parties with each election has intense the need for more finances in the election to attract the voters in their favour. This has resulted in a growing involvement of the business groups in the electoral politics of the country. There has been a 613 per cent rise in donations from the corporate sector to the political parties since 2004 and more recently with the introduction of the electoral bond scheme; the contributions to political parties have increased much more than before. Therefore, this paper moves forward with the objective to analyse the corporate funding to the political parties and has also focused on the impact of this growing involvement of the corporate on the electorate.

Keywords: Elections, Political Funding, Electorate, Corporate.

The 2019 Lok Sabha elections in the country is considered to be the costliest in the history of Indian elections with a total expenditure of Rs. 55,000 crores according to a Centre for Media Studies report with 35 percent spending on campaign or publicity. The report mentions that the election expenditure has gone up by around six times from 1998 to 2019 (Centre for Media Studies Report, 2019). The election expenditure includes advertisement and publicity, public meeting expenses, assistance to candidates, travel expenses and other miscellaneous expenses. One of the new kinds of expenses added in the recent years is the digital campaigning expenses. The political parties hire dedicated team of Public Relations (PR) firms that planned everything for them to add more innovation to the election campaigns since 2014