

Vulnerability of women in unorganized sector with special reference to women beedi workers in Udupi district of Karnataka.

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Abstract

Indian economy is strongly supported by the workers in the unorganized informal sector. Around 90 percent of the total workers come from the informal sector who contributes to almost 50 percent of the economic production. Though their contribution is considerably high in supporting the Indian economy their condition in the social and economic field is very poor. A large majority of the workers in the unorganized sector are women. They are distributed in various areas of work from agriculture to manufacture. The women workers are the most vulnerable group in the unorganized sector in India as their position in the society itself is lower to that of men. Their earnings in most cases, are the sole support of the family, yet they do not enjoy any freedom or security in and outside the family. The reasons for their vulnerability are many starting from patriarchal system to dual role and social discrimination.

A major category of workers in the unorganized sector are home based workers, who are engaged in production of services or goods for an employer or contractor. The issues and problems of these workers are complex since they are unorganized and as such they do not have the power to bargain. Beedi rolling is one of the largest home based industries in the unorganized sector. Women constitute a large portion of this industry as it is home based and individualized work.

The beedi industry provides potential job opportunity to a large number of workers, especially women and children. The present study try to find out the vulnerability of women beedi rollers with respect to their health, economic and social conditions, legal protection, decision making power etc.

Key words: Unorganized sector, beedi rolling industry, women workers, vulnerability of unorganized workers

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Introduction

The unorganized sector in India comprises units that engaged in production of goods and services, largely on a small scale with limited capital, minimum division of labour and minimum employee- employer relation. Though these are units that operate on a small scale with minimum capital they are the backbone of Indian economy as they contribute to 50 percentage of the total economic production of the country. In terms of work force and contribution to national economy their role is unaccountable and they are the source of income for a large number of workers.

As per the Economic Survey of 2007-08, 93% of India's workforce is in the unorganized, informal sector. The Ministry of Labour, Government of India, has categorized the unorganized labour force under four groups in terms of occupation, nature of employment, specially distressed categories and service categories.

1. In terms of Occupation:

Small and marginal farmers, share croppers, fishermen, those engaged in animal husbandry, beedi rolling, leather workers, labeling and packing, landless agricultural labourers, artisans, salt workers, building and construction workers, weavers, workers in brick kilns and stone quarries, workers in saw mills, oil mills etc. come under this category.

2. In terms of Nature of Employment:

Attached agricultural labourers, bonded labourers, migrant workers, contract and casual labourers come under this.

3. In terms of Specially distressed categories:

Loaders and un loaders, Scavengers, Carriers of head loads, Drivers of animal driven vehicles, Toddy tappers come under this category.

4. In terms of Service categories:

Vegetable and fruit vendors, Domestic workers, Fishermen and women, Barbers, Midwives, News paper vendors etc. belong to this category.

In addition to these four categories, there exists a large section of unorganized labour force such as cobblers, tailors, Handicraft artisans, Handloom weavers, Physically handicapped self employed persons, Auto drivers, Rikshaw pullers, Sericulture workers, Tannery workers, Carpenters and Power loom workers.

Unorganized or informal sector is the source of income for majority of the work force in India. Informal sector is the largest source of employment for women than men. A high proportion of these workers come from the socially and economically poor classes which add to their vulnerability. Women in unorganized sector struggle through the problems since, in most cases; they are the sole supporters of their family. They are largely out of social and legal protection and suffer from all sorts of exploitation ranging from low wages to occupational insecurity.

The unorganized sector is largely characterized by scattered work where there is no uniformity in the work pattern, wages, conditions of work etc. The employer- employee relation is very weak and exploitation is maximum. The nature of work is such that they do not have any social and labour legislation to protect their interests. Low capital investment leads to maximum work with minimum wages.

Beedi rolling -a home based work in the unorganized sector

There are quite a large number of unorganized workers who are home based workers. The home based workers are those who are engaged in production of services or goods for an employer or contractor in an arrangement whereby the work is carried out in a place of the worker's choice, in most cases in his own house. It has been estimated that 3crore workers in India are home based workers. Among these 45 lakh are beedi rolling workers, 65 lakh are handloom weavers

and 48 lakh are rural artisans and craft persons. Others employed in agarbatti making, papad making, zari workers etc.(Labour Bureau:Indian labour year book 2011-12)

Beedi rolling industry is one of the largest unorganized sector works in India. The industry is spread across the country and concentrated in 13 states and 3 union territories. Beedi workers are among the most exploited workers in India. They are poor, illiterate or less educated, subject to low wages and over all highly exploited by the contractors. The issues and problems of these workers are complex since they work independently from their home and lack consensus with other workers in the same field. Their bargaining power is minimum as they rarely or never come together and identify their common goals and interests. As such it is difficult to organize to place their demands for better opportunities. Moreover the casual nature of employment, scattered and small establishments, ignorance and illiteracy prevent them from coming together for fulfilling their demands.

Beedi industry is a growing industry with many men; women and children are working in it. In factory system most of the work is done by men. In home based system it is the women and children that take up the work of beedi rolling for which they get the raw material from the middlemen. Even within the factory system women largely take up the work of rolling the beedi.

The industry is spread across the country and most of the beedi making work is carried out in rural and semi-urban areas. Most of the beedi making work is carried out under the contractual, home based piece rate system. Women and children predominate, constituting around 90 per cent of all home based workers.

Women workers in beedi industry

Women in India are one of the weaker sections as the patriarchal system bestowed a lower status to them in all fields of life. In traditional period women were subjected to all sorts of discrimination whether it is in the social, economic, familial, political or economic field. They were confined within the four walls of the house. But today women have more freedom; the educational opportunities widened the scope of attaining more status in society and enjoying more power at home. However, it cannot be applied universally as there a number of women even when they are educated, employed and have independent earning their decision making

power and power to control the resources are minimum. This is reflected not only in the household activities but as workers outside home also they are more vulnerable than men.

Women workers, though employed, are not free from their house hold responsibilities. The burden of double role and the physical weaknesses as females limit their outside role. It often become difficult for them for making a balance between work and family responsibility. They are susceptible to all sorts of exploitation, physically, mentally and emotionally.

Beedi rolling is one of the popular amongst the unorganized industry where women constitute a large portion of the labour because it is homebased and an economic security to the women. More than 50 % of the beedi workers are women. These workers bear the double burden as unorganized workers and as women who enjoy a lower status to that of men.

Women take up beedi rolling as it is a home based work and they can do it without affecting their household chores or by adjusting the household responsibilities. There is no routine timings fixed by an employer and the work can be structured flexibly according to their convenience. The flexibility of working hours which can be decided individually make them to take up the work but sometimes that may become a risk as they cannot manage the time because of unavoidable situations. Many women do it as an additional work along with some other work which they are engaged in the unorganized sector like domestic help, agricultural labour etc. In such cases managing working hours become a problem as they have to adjust with three kinds of work, household work, rolling beedi and the additional work done outside. This increases their vulnerability.

They are employed in beedi rolling because of their proficiency in the work but are discriminated by low payment. The contractors use different modes to exploit and harass these susceptible and vulnerable workers. They are exploited socially and economically and are one of the most vulnerable groups in India especially because the work is in the informal sector. The reasons for their vulnerability are augmented by the fact that they are women and they belong to low economic category. They have no bargaining power, no control over earning, lack decision making power and have dual role of work and home management. Unequal gender relations, especially the patriarchal system and lack of assets go a long way in pushing them down in all fields of life. Thus they are vulnerable both at home and in society.

Beedi industry in Udupi

The undivided Dakshina Kannada District is well known for its beedi industry. A large number of people, particularly women, find it a good source of income and an easy and convenient pastime. There are about 35 prominent factories in this district, most of them are located in Mangalore. These factories are linked with a network of branches and contractors in different places of the district. It is estimated that about 6 lakh workers live by rolling beedis in this district. The number does not include those unidentified workers who are largely working from home under contractors who supply the necessary raw materials and collect the finished products. An estimated two lakh workers are engaged in the work in Udupi district. Of the total number of workers, only 10-15 percent only gets the benefit of the Factories Act and other labour legislations. The rest are "out-door workers" who take tobacco and beedi leaves to their homes for making beedis.

Need of the study:

There are a wide range of disciplines that undertake studies related to the unorganized women workers and workers in beedi rolling industry where women constitute a major work force. The Unorganized sector with a large labour force which contributes to almost 50% of the GDP is a subject of deep interest in Economics. As the unorganized work force in beedi industry largely comprises women and child workers who are highly exploited in the absence of organizational power and loose employer- employee relation often draw the attention of the sociologists to find out solutions and to suggest policies for their protection and welfare. The health hazards of the industry which not only affects the workers but also children and family members as it is a home based work, lead to the study of morbidity pattern of these workers by health sciences. Women Studies take up the issue as the women in this industry are highly exploited by way of low wages, sexual exploitation etc. Social policy makers study such groups with the intention of framing policies to provide security to these groups.

The review of related literature and an analysis of the development in the field of research related to unorganized women workers reveal the extent of studies conducted in this area. Since beedi industry is one of the traditional home based industry of India there are quite a number of studies conducted on the topic.

Most of these studies cover the socio-economic profile of the workers, health of the women workers, Child labour in beedi industry and so on. The present study is taken in the light of NSSO reports which state the tremendous transformations taking place in the Indian labour market including growth in informal sector, deterioration in the quality of employment with respect to job security, terms and conditions in work, weakening of worker organizations etc. To a greater extent, this transformation could be related to the globalization process and the resultant efforts on the part of employers to minimize the cost of production to the lowest levels. This study tries to find out the extent and nature of vulnerability of the women in beedi rolling industry as unorganized category and as women workers.

Objectives

- To find out the vulnerability of the unorganized women beedi workers in the social and economic field.
- To understand the health risks of the workers.
- To find out the extent to which these workers are covered by the welfare programmes.
- To understand the nature and extent of empowerment of unorganized women workers.

Methodology

All women Beedi workers of Udupi are considered the Universe for this study. Out of which the sample for study is selected. A sample of around 40 women beedi workers were selected for the study through random selection and primary data was collected using an interview schedule.

Both primary and secondary data have been used for the study. Relevant websites, books, periodicals and news papers were used for secondary data. In addition, information collected from village panchayats, beedi contractors and voluntary organizations were used.

Findings of the study:

Profile of respondents

The study was conducted among a group of beedi rolling women who belong to the age group 30 to 50 years of age. All of them belong to Hindu religion and are married. The educational status of the women ranged from primary to Pre University level. 80% of the respondents are staying in independent nuclear families and 60% of them are living in own houses constructed in the land provided by the Panchayat for the economically weaker sections, which comes under the housing

scheme initiated by the Panchayats in Karnataka. 20% are living in the parental joint family. About 70% percentage of the respondents are doing beedi rolling as an additional work. Only 30% of the respondents have taken beedi rolling as their sole occupation. Other occupations engaged by them include agricultural labour, domestic work, class IV(Group D) employees in private institutions, sales women, work in cashew factory etc. 60% of them started beedi rolling in early ages of 8-9 years by assisting their mother or elder sisters.

Socio-economic conditions

All the respondents are reported to be coming from poor economic background and belong to below poverty line category. Though engaged in this business for quite a long time, does not altogether brought change in their socio economic background. About 10% of them reported to have doing the work carried through three generations without any visible change in their economic conditions. Saving habit is minimum as the income from work is just enough to manage the day-to-day matters. Majority of them fulfill their economic needs by taking loans but it is said that the income from beedi rolling help them to repay the loans as it is a regular source, though not very high, to depend during emergencies. A large percentage of the workers are members of Self Help Groups which help them to avail loans and they repay the amount by way of the additional income managed through beedi rolling.

The Minimum wage applicable to beedi workers is fixed at 1000 beedi rolled rate. The respondents reported to be getting 120- 140 for a bundle of 1000 beedis. But they agree that they are not getting this on a daily basis, as they are not able to finish 1000 beedis per day and there will be deduction in the wages on the basis of quality.

Many of these workers put an average of 6-10 hours of work yet could not meet the target. Sometimes, when they could not finish the expected work the leaves used for rolling tobacco many be damaged adding to their loss.

The contractors cheat these helpless women by distributing poor quality tobacco and leaves or without giving tobacco proportionate to the number of leaves provided for rolling it. This will reduce the number of total beedis produced and price for that will be deducted from the workers' wages. As illiterate or less educated they trust the contractors in calculating the actual rolled, rejected and the deductions leaving them susceptible to the cheatings of the contractors. Another form of exploitation is the unnecessarily high rejection rate at collection time. Beedis are rejected for bad leaves, less tobacco, size variation, weight difference, loosely tied etc.

The respondents reported of their inability to control the resources. Most of them pointed out the alcoholic habits of their husbands as a major problem which prevents them from finishing their work on time or the misuse of their hard earned money by the men as they have no hold on such matters.

Accessibility of Welfare programmes

Majority of these workers are not coming under the social legislations and welfare measures of the government as they work as piece wage workers in the home based production and not directly connected to the any Beedi industry. The workers attached to factories are having the identity cards/ pass book and are eligible for bonus, scholarship for children and pension. Even in the few areas where identity cards or pass books are given, they are generally in the names of male heads of households or husbands, depriving women of benefits. Majority of the respondents reported to be outside the limits of the social and health security measures. Though they work they have to be satisfied with the wages for the number of beedis they have rolled and do not have any allowances or protection.

Those who are eligible for availing these facilities are reported to have been failing to fulfill the demands or targets of finishing the required number of beedis on time. Few of them reported to have been getting these facilities earlier but had to discontinue due to several factors like inability work for sometime due to illness, distance of the beedi collecting centres from home, closure of the companies where they were working etc.

There is no uniformity in the calculation of pension and bonus as everything depends on the wages per 1000 beedis which vary with respect to areas.

Impact on health

Regarding the health hazards it has been pointed out that long hours of work and the way in which they sit, and the raw materials that they use are likely to develop health hazards. Beedi rolling is a work associated with two raw materials, the leaf and the tobacco, both cause health hazards. The tobacco dust can lead to many problems. Most of these workers work from single room or congested area without proper ventilation and air circulation which lead to the tobacco dust being inhaled leading to breathing problems.

Majority of the workers or their family members are found to be suffering from one or other chronic or periodic diseases which are attributed to the effect of beedi rolling, yet many of the

respondents were either unaware or unwilling to accept the fact. Severe health problems are noted in 80% of the families affecting not only the beedi rollers but also the young and old of the family. The noted health problems include cough, sinusitis, cancer, breathing problems, joint pains, numbness of fingers, discoloring of nails etc,

Many of them work till late night under light or lamp which results in problems with eye sight, regular head ache etc. 55% of them have pakka houses with electric connection which enable them to work at night under better lighting conditions but voltage problems and power cuts become hindrances in their regular work.

The health problems get aggravated when they have to finish the target within a short period for which they sit hours together. The respondents of the present study, who are employed elsewhere, are unable to reach the target hence they do not make any higher targets that is unachievable.

Economic and political empowerment

Though the women work day and night and earn money, they have no control over their earnings. The patriarchy works as a draw back in this respect. Economic empowerment of the women workers need to go along with political empowerment, which could improve their bargaining power both in household and at work. Organizing women workers in the informal sector could have beneficial effects only if efforts are taken to empower them politically and economically. Access to resources such as credit and information and power of decision making should be combined for the holistic development. The unorganized women beedi workers contribute largely to the maintenance of informal economy, still they face multiple constraints which otherwise compel them to live a life full of compromises. Since they work from home they don't have control over the working hours. Since the work is a mixed up with household work, it is often difficult to count the hours of work strictly devoted to beedi making. However, the pressure to fulfill targets being high, women often make adjustments with their time for food, sleep, rest, entertainment and social obligations.

Conclusion

The women beedi workers are living an unsecured life with high levels of tension and are never secure about their status as workers. Their poverty, weak constitution, lack of rest, endless work, poor food habits have been reported as factors making them susceptible to diseases. Exposure to

tobacco and the working conditions among beedi workers are known to have caused intestinal and reproductive problems. Anemia and malnutrition are also common among these women.

Low income women workers, especially in the informal sector form one of the most vulnerable groups in the Indian economy. The reasons for their vulnerability are-(a) irregular work, (b) low economic status, (c) little or no bargaining power, (d) lack of control over earnings, (e) need to balance paid work with care for children and homework, (f) little or no access to institutional credit, training and information, and (g) lack of assets. Unequal gender relations play a very important role in defining their insecurities. Given their vulnerable status at home and at work, income generation alone may not improve the socio-economic status of women attached to the informal sector. Their economic empowerment needs to go along with political empowerment, which could improve their bargaining power both in household and at work.

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