



Economic Empowerment of Migrant Women in Brick Manufacturing Units in Coimbatore

K. ARULSELVAM

Economic growth is a means to human well-being and to the expansion of human freedom. It is not an end in itself, with intrinsic value. The ends are realizing human rights and advancing human development. (*Human Development Report, 2000*)

Human resources have a two prolonged relationship with economic development. As a resource, people are available as factors of production to work in combination with other factors. As consumers, the goal of economic development is to maximize realization of their desires and aspirations. Fuller and better utilization of human resources is a means of achieving development in any country. Human resources

especially women power that is women's share in development is considered as one of the most important factors. (*Dhingra and Garg, 2005*) Women are an integral part of society, and hence round development and harmonious growth of a nation would be possible only when women are given their desired place and position in the society.

Empowerment of women being one of the primary objectives of the Ninth Plan (1997-2002), every effort was made to create an enabling environment where women can freely exercise their rights both within and outside home as equal partners along with men.

Women as an independent target group, account for 495.74 million and represent 48.3 percent of the country's population as per 2001 census. Empowering women as a process demands a life-cycle approach. Therefore, every stage of their life counts as a priority in the planning process. Depending upon the developmental needs, at every stage, female population has been categorized into distinct sub-groups. They include:

- ❖ Girl children in the age group 0-14 years who account for 171.50 million (34.6 percent).
- ❖ Adolescent girls in the age group 15-19 years who account for 52.14 million (10.5 percent) are very sensitive from the view point of planning because of preparatory stage for their future, productive and reproductive role, in the society and family.
- ❖ Women in the reproductive age group that is 15-44 years which account for 233.72 million (41.7 percent) needs special care and attention.
- ❖ Women in the economically active age group 15-59 years who account for 289.40 million (58.4 percent) have different demand like those of education/training, employment, income generation and participation in the developmental, process, decision-making, etc.
- ❖ The elderly women in the age group 60+ years numbering 34.897 million (7.0 percent) have limited needs and they need health, financial and emotional support.

Empowerment is a holistic concept. It is multi-dimensional in its approach and involves a basic realization and awareness of one's power and potentialities, capabilities and competencies and of one's right and opportunities for development in important spheres. Such dimensions of development or empowerment may be categorized as legal, political, economic and social.

The strategy of empowering women involves the following:

- Social Empowerment
- Economic Empowerment
- Gender Justice

SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

Creating an enabling environment through various affirmative developmental policies and programmes for development of women, besides providing them easy and equal access to all the basic minimum services so as to enable them to realize their full potentials.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

To ensure provisions of training, employment and income generation activities with both 'forward' and 'backward' linkages with the ultimate objectives of making all potential women economically independent and self-reliant.

GENDER JUSTICE

To eliminate all forms of gender discrimination and thus allow women to enjoy all rights and fundamental freedom on par with men in all spheres, viz., political, economic, social, civil, cultural, etc.

As the ultimate goal or objective of empowering women is to make them economically independent and self-reliant, economic empowerment occupies an important position and utmost significance for a lasting and sustainable development of a society.

So, the current paper focuses on only economic empowerment of women and the sequence of the paper is as follows:

- I. Present status of women in terms of select gender development indicators.
- II. Employment situation and work participation.
- III. Problems encountered by women in informal sector.
- IV. Critical areas of concern and initiatives needed.

I. Present Status of Women

This section gives an account of achievements in the select indicators of demography, literacy and education, work and employment.

TABLE I
Population by Sex and Decennial Growth Rate

Census	Male		Female		Total	
	Population	DGR	Population	DGR	Population	DGR
1981	353.4	24.41	330.0	24.93	683.4	24.66
1991	439.2	24.30	407.1	23.37	846.3	23.86
2001	531.3	20.03	495.7	21.79	1027.0	21.34

Source : Census Figures 1981, 1991, 2001 : Registrar-General and Census Commissioner, GOI, New Delhi.

There has been a slight increase in the female population of the country; from 407.1 million in 1991 to 495.7 million in 2001, yet the demographic imbalances between women and men continue to exist till date.

The sex ratio which represents the survival scene of women, registered a very marginal improvement from 927 in 1991 to 93 in 2001 as evident in Table 2.

The mean age of marriage for females has also increased from 18.3 years in 1981 to 19.5 years in 1997, this is due to Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1976, education and employment of women/girls also played a very important role in raising the age of marriage. Literacy levels bear the important relationship to women's occupational behaviour. The

TABLE 2
Sex Ratio (1981-2001)

<i>Census</i>	<i>Sex Ratio</i>
1981	937
1991	927
2001	933

Note : Sex Ratio: Females per 1000 males.

Source : Census of India 2001, 1991 and 1981.

more education a woman status attains, the higher her occupational prestige and more time she spends in labour market.

II. Employment Situation and Work Participation

Details on women work participation in India are reported in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Work Participation Rate in India (1981-2001)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Persons</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
1981	Total	36.7	52.6	19.7
	Rural	38.8	53.8	23.1
	Urban	30.0	49.1	8.3
1991	Total	37.7	51.6	22.7
	Rural	40.2	52.5	27.2
	Urban	30.4	49.0	9.7
2001	Total	39.2	51.9	25.7
	Rural	42.0	52.4	31.0
	Urban	32.2	50.9	11.6

Source : Census of India, 1991, Series-1, (India) Paper 3 of 1991. Provisional Population Tables : Workers and their Distribution.

Main findings of the census figures are as follows:

- In general, the total work participation rate (WPR) had shown an increasing trend from 1981 onwards.

WPR was 36.7 percent in 1981; it improved to 37.7 percent in 1991 and further improved to 39.2 percent in 2001.

- Increase in work participation rate is more perceptible in rural than in urban areas. Work participation rate in rural areas was 42.0 percent in 2001 as against 40.2 percent in 1991 and that in urban area was 32.2 percent in 2001 as against 30.4 percent in 1991.
- In the case of males, WPR in rural areas was 52.4 percent in 2001 which was also the level attained in 1991; however, there is a slight improvement in WPR in urban areas in the WPR rising to 50.9 percent in 2001 as against 49.0 percent in 1991.
- The work participation rate for females in rural areas has increased from 27.2 percent in 1991 to 31.0 percent in 2001 an increase by 3.8 percent, but in the case of urban areas, WPR increased from 9.7 percent in 1991 to 11.6 percent in 2001, an increase by merely 1.7 percent.
- From the census data, the conclusion emerges that rural women are more burdened; not only they participate in larger numbers in economic activity, they have to return home from that activity to undertake domestic work like cooking, cleaning, tending of cattle and child bearing and child rearing.

TABLE 4
Women in the Organised Sector (Figures in Million)

Year	Men	Women	Total
1981	20.1	2.8 (12.2)	22.9
1991	23.0	3.8 (14.1)	26.7
2001	23.28	4.83 (17.2)	28.11

Figures within parenthesis indicate percentage to total.

The informal sector in the Indian economy grew out of bounds because the employment in the formal sector did not

expand significantly inspite of the several five year plans. Employment in organized sector requires minimum education qualification and skill.

People who could not get employment in the organized sector landed up in the informal sector and they were open to all types of risks of uncertainty in income earnings, and suffered from insecurity of employment.

Informal sector which refers to employment which is completely outside the place of institutional protection like regulated working conditions and trade unionism. This sector accounts for 69 percent of non-agricultural employment in India in 1990-2000 (*Financial Express, 2003*). The literature indicates that one of the distinct features of the informal sector is predominance of migrant population in different activities in rural/urban areas. Such an informal sector is the residual sector of employment for the low skilled, untrained women with little bargaining power. Households frequently choose to allocate labour to various self-employment activities, wage labour within or near the village or to migration (*Taylor et. al., 2004*). Women get absorbed in large numbers as construction worker, self-employed persons and casual labour in urban areas in informal sector.

III. Problem Faced by Women in Informal Sector

The building and construction industry is the second largest industry and absorbs of the bulk of the Indian labour force in the unorganized sector. This industry is characterized by aspect like instability, short duration, wide range of skill, management of complex information, exploitation of workers, etc. (*Anand, 1998*).

The construction industry is a highly labour intensive activity absorbing a large number of skilled and unskilled human power. The building and construction industry cover a wide spectrum of activities ranging from construction for habitation, institutions for commercial and industry purpose to construction of large developmental structures like dams, tunnels, towers and so on. It also supports the other closely linked ancillary industries like brick kilns, tile factories, stone quarrying, etc.

Coimbatore, one of the districts of Tamilnadu due to its growing urbanization and commercialization hosts a large migrant population in its different activities especially in construction industry. Brick-making units are heavily concentrated in one of the blocks in Coimbatore viz., Perianaickenpalayam (Kanuvai, Thadagam and Verrapandipur). In these units around 5000 migrant workers are employed as seasonal workers who had migrated from the districts of Madurai, Theni, Trichy, Salem, Dharmapuri, Kanyakumari and Dindigul, etc.

Nature and Conditions of Work for Women in Brick Units

Women workers constitute around 50 percent of the total work force in a typical brick unit. They normally move into these units with their men or families. They are involved in different stages brick-making. The first stage involves the preparation of clay out of two different types of soil, which is used for cutting of bricks. In making clay, both men and women are involved, whereas in cutting of bricks. Only men work as it involves some kind of skill. These cut bricks are transferred to brick sheds with women assisting mostly kept in shades to dry for one week. The raw bricks will be shifted to chamber/kiln for heating purpose. The arranging of raw brick in chamber is really hazardous to health as workers are constantly exposed to dust and heat. After one week's time, the finished bricks will be ready for sale. In loading of bricks in the lorries from the chamber, women participate in large number.

Women working in industry work for about 8 to 9 hours per day on an average (the working time, starts from 7.30 onwards). They are paid in the range of Rs. 40-50 per day as piece rate, (brick shifting, and brick lifting). As women are to work continuously, they become very tired and monotony makes them less productive.

On the basis of gender, there is problem of wage discrimination mainly because of unawareness and lack of bargaining power to struggle for higher wages in brick industry. Women in brick industry are exposed to lot of health hazards like back pain and hip pain especially when they are associated with brick loading. They are provided with basic amenities in the work place like free sheds to reside, drinking

water, meeting out medical expenses by the owners of brick chamber in the case of serious injuries at the work spot. Only in recent times, brick owners have started giving some incentives in the form of free clothes during festive seasons.

Issues of Concern

(a) Public Distribution Services

Fair price shops are basically meant for people falling below the poverty line. Brick workers form a large population earning less than subsistence level. None of the worker can avail the facility of a ration card due to the following reasons:

- There is no provision for issuing of temporary ration card to the worker, as they are not able to prove their identity as a migrant labour.
- Some of the migrant workers have ration cards at the places of their origin which had been either handed over to their relatives or mortgaged for some reason or other. Lot of time is wasted in locating the nearby grocery shops and managing the food items within the restrictive budget.

(b) Educational Facilities

The children of the brick industry workers especially at the pre-school age are just left scattered in and around the brick sheds. These children are indirectly forced to remain out of educational arena sealing their future as unskilled workers.

(c) Banking Facilities

The 'habit of saving' is totally absent among the brick workers. The condition of hand to mouth situation and the burden of repayment of old debts; they have no special saving schemes or loan facilities meant for them as these mobile workers are constrained to prove their identity.

(d) Health Conditions

Since the brick workers are to work continuously with no break, they are exposed to a lot of health problems like hip

pain, shoulder pain and sometimes chest pain too. Their food consumption pattern consists mostly of cereals and no adequate nutritious meal is consumed. Along with this, their monotony at work spot also makes them less productive.

IV. Critical Areas of Concern and Initiatives Needed

In the global restructuring of economies, creating opportunities for women will be a prudent policy, for enhancing economic growth. Priority issues for planning human resources to further increase women's participation in workforce both quantitatively and qualitatively include the following:

- The present pattern of education deserves close scrutiny; introduction of practical, technical as an option in the educational system is urgently needed.
- There is need to identify women in informal sector activities and they are not recognized in official statistics. Women must be identified according to the type of work performed, place of residence, age, social status and similar characteristics.
- Labour legislation, safety and health regulation and employment benefits do not normally apply to the informal sector. This should be considered while designing and planning various programmes.
- The constitutional commitment of "Equal Pay for Equal Work" to be strictly ensured among all workers.
- Special attention needs to be given to improve their working conditions as most of the women work under unhygienic and precarious condition.
- Better childcare facilities, maternity benefits, protection from occupational hazards need to be emphasized.
- Training programmes at the places of destination for migrant workers as they are displaced from their traditional sector need to be organized.
- Creating awareness about the on going governmental programmes on poverty alleviation and income generation need to be strengthened.

- Increasing access to credit facilities for women through banking network system, which help them, promoting entrepreneurial activities.
- Organizing more and more of Self-Help Groups both in rural and urban areas is urgently called for.
- A crucial policy issue for governments all over the world is how to provide adequate social protection for the labour force engaged in unorganized sector activities. So, designing effective social protection measures for these workers, which would serve as guarantee against poverty and at the same time provide adequate employment opportunities need to be given top priority.

CONCLUSION

These efforts will definitely enhance potentialities and capabilities of women to make them economically independent that will in turn lead to empowerment of women. Social groups, voluntary organizations and non-governmental organizations have active role in making these efforts fruitful.

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