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BOOK REVIEW

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AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON UNORGANIZED WOMEN WORKERS IN COIMBATORE CITY

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Unorganized sector is an important source of employment for women than formal employment. Liberalization was predicated to increase participation of women. Studies have shown that it became true due to the fact that the demand for women labour increased because it was cheaper than male labour. Most of the women were compelled to do low productive, unskilled and insecure jobs either to supplement family income or due to loss of jobs by the male single bread earner. Poverty forced them to undertake home base contract and part time jobs, domestic work, street vending and rag picking (Deshpande 1992) i.e. burden of work doubled. In fact in the case of women workers, much of their normal work is unorganized and unpaid, hence does not enter many standard labour force and employment indicators. The activities like processing of primary produce for own consumption, services such as cleaning, child care and so on which are undertaken within the household and not marketed are not treated as work participation and informal labour.

In India and Indonesia the informal sector accounts for nine out of every ten women working outside agriculture. This sector is a larger source of employment for women than for men (UN, 2000). Large number of women working in home based sub-contracting activities, are often treated on a piece rate basis and are usually very poorly paid and without any non-wage benefits especially in respect of export oriented manufacturing companies and multinational companies operating in India (Bose, 1996). The scatter nature of home based workers gives scope for neither collective bargaining nor unionization, but only leads to self-exploitation. Moreover in the new production line of value chain, workers have no direct relation with the ultimate employer to look after the welfare and it is a precarious consequence of globalization. The proportion of women workers in the work force is an indicator of the socio economic profile of the informal sector workers. It is argued that the lower the earnings of the households, the higher will be the women participation in the work force and vice versa.

Globalization resulted in increase in women employment in low paid and low

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skilled areas. Feminization of labour occurred where profit margins are protected by reducing labour costs, extending hours and decreasing the number of formal workers (Standing, 1999).

Review of Literature

WHO (1998) carried out a study on readymade garment workers in Bangladesh, on a sample size of 150 women who reported health problems like pain in the upper and lower limbs and other aches and pains. Around 80 percent of the workers experienced this kind of illness quite often. This was followed by backache, which was reported by 47 percent. The major reason was the posture adopted while working.

Srinivasan, (2000) studied the conceptual issues of the unorganized sector along with profile of women employment and its trend. These women had no say at all and were away from the legal protection. Non-farm employment hailed as the panacea for surplus-labour in agricultural sector which could not pick up in rural India and the women were most affected.

Singh, (2002) conducted a study on domestic workers of Ranchi District. The system of recruitment was faulty and age of recruitment often violated human rights. Wages were too low and workers did not enjoy any kind of medical benefit. Their hours of work were very long and were not spread out evenly. There were no holidays or leave sanctioned or approved by their employers. They lacked work proficiency and did not possess formal training. She further reported that basic poverty lead to poor bargaining capacity. The workers did not possess knowledge of alternate sources of income generation. Fatalism and superstition were all pervasive. She found that in most cases the number of dependents on the earning members was too large, this lowered the standard of living and at times to indebtedness.

Vandana (2012) made an attempt to understand the socioeconomic conditions of women laborers, nature of work, their working conditions, wage pattern, wage discrimination and other difficulties faced by them at their work place. Multistage stratified random sampling technique was applied to collect data from 350 women laborers from urban and rural areas of three districts of Haryana: Panipat, Kaithal and Kurukshetra. Findings showed that majority of the migrant women were engaged in the construction industry and were only employed in unskilled and low paying jobs as coolies, laborers and helpers. Women were exploited to a greater degree as they were paid less compared to men for similar nature of work and hours spent on work. The conditions of work in the unorganized sector were unsatisfactory and the problems confronted by them were acute. Their illiteracy, poverty and indebtedness forced them to work for lower wages and under unjust conditions.

Objectives of the Study

To examine the socio-economic background of the women workers in unorganized sector.

To study the working conditions of the women workers.

To analyze the occupational health hazard of the women workers.

Methodology

Coimbatore is a developed and commercially vibrant district of Tamilnadu. Women in the city while establishing firm foothold in literary and social status, seem to have remained outside their participation in the economy. The present study is confined to a selected group of 60 women in unorganized sectors who were working in various capacities such as construction workers, domestic servants, vendors and other self-employed workers like mat weaving, bamboo weaving in Coimbatore city. The study was conducted in select urban areas like poomarket and Sivananda colony. The study was based on primary data. The samples were selected by adopting purposive sampling technique, since not all members in the particular areas were willing to supply the required information; the investigator approached only those members who were willing to cooperate to give the information. The data collected during March 2013. The required information was collected by administering an interview schedule to the selected respondents.

Findings of the Study

The social environment is a combination of factors such as religion, caste, family type, marital status and age, while economic environment is made up of factors such as education, occupation, income and expenditure. A clear insight into the socio-economic factors is of paramount significance to establish the influence of these factors on the life and activities of the respondents. The table 1 shows the socio-economic condition of unorganized women workers.

Table-1 Socio-Economic Background of the Women Workers

Characteristics		Frequency	Percentage
Age (in years)	Less than 30	15	26.2
	30-45	32	56.1
	Above 45	10	17.5
Marital status	Married	38	66.7
	Unmarried	4	7.0
	Widowed	9	15.8
	Separated	6	10.5

Source: Field Survey, 2013

Education	Illiterate	20	35.1
	Primary	26	45.6
	Secondary	7	12.3
	Higher secondary	4	7.0
Occupation	Construction	21	36.8
	Vendors (vegetables, fruits, flowers)	16	28.1
	Domestic servants	11	19.3
	Self employed	9	15.8
Family type	Nuclear family	38	66.7
	Joint family	19	33.3
Income per day (in Rs)	Less than 250	12	21.1
	250-500	28	49.1
	Above 500	17	29.8
Total		57	100.0

The table-1 revealed that majority of the women belonged to age group of 30-45 years, which proved to be the most potential age for women to work very hard. A greater part of the women were married. Nearly half of the population had only primary education and 35 percent of the women were illiterate. This is one reason why many women were still in unorganized sector. Most of the women workers (67 percent) belonged to nuclear family and 33 percent stated that they were from joint family. Working in this sector does not require any education and hence many were forced to take up some jobs. The illiterate women were mostly employed as domestic servants or ayahas to look after children. There were only 7 percent who have done higher secondary education and many were self-employed. Most of the women were employed in construction works. The monthly income of 28 women was reported to be between Rs.250-500 while 17 women earned income more than Rs 500 per day.

Working Conditions of the Women Workers

Women workers in unorganized sector lag behind the males in terms of level and quality of employment. The women have to perform dual duty outside employment in harsh and hostile working conditions and manage their homes, come across problems, which need a loud hearing. These women are often illiterate, unskilled socially backward and economically weak which often hide their work participation. The living and working conditions of the women workers in the unorganized sector is very miserable. This problem is mainly associated with their poor socio-economic background that they inherit. The workers in the unorganized sector are generally considered the poorest workers in India and most were exposed to shocks and stresses threatening their livelihood (Breman, 1996).

Working Hours

Working conditions are reflected through many things and one of the most important indicators is the hours of work. The hours of work was considered to gauge the extent of work burden on women and this is depicted in table 2.

Table -2 Working Hours

Hours	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 8	17	29.8
8-10	29	50.9
Above 10	11	19.3
Total	57	100

Source: Filed Survey, 2013

Most of the women (51 percent) were working for a maximum of 8-10 hours a day because they start their work in the early hours of the day. Among these women only 30 percent worked for less than 8 hours a day, followed by 19 percent who worked more than 10 hours a day. The significant differences in the working hours can be attributed to the nature of their work. There is no fixed working hours of the women workers. They are made to work for long hours and wages paid to them are not according to their work.

Work Experience

Though many have taken up this venture without any education or skill, the samples have gained experience in their particular field as is shown in table 3.

Table-3 Work Experience

Years of Experience	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 5	9	15.8
5-10	33	57.9
Above 10	15	26.3
Total	57	100

Source: Filed Survey, 2013

Majority of the women (56 percent) had work experience of 5-10 years. The women having more than 10 years of experience were 26 percent and those with less than 5 years of experience were 16 percent.

Basic Facilities at the Workplace

Table 4 revealed the basic facilities available for the women workers at their work place.

Table-4 Basic Facilities at the Workplace

Facilities	Frequency	Percentage
Drinking water	18	31.6
Toilets	15	26.3
Electricity	11	19.3
Ventilation	13	22.8
Total	57	100.0

Source: Filed Survey,2013

Most of the women workers (32 percent) had drinking water facilities at work place; 26 percent of them had toilet facilities and rarely will they go for open defecation. Similarly 23 percent of the women workers expressed that they had proper ventilation or atmosphere. Only 19 percent stated that there was an electricity connection in the workplace. There is no proper ventilation, sanitation or drainage system which affects the health and efficiency of the workers.

Working Condition at Workplace

Sanitation, lack of adequate and portable water supply; unhygienic surroundings of the living and working area are some of the factors that affected the health of the workers. Table 5 depicts the working conditions at work place of the women workers.

Table -5 Working Condition at Workplace

Facilities	Frequency	Percentage
Hygienic	16	28.1
Unhygienic	41	71.9
Total	57	100.0

Source: Filed Survey,2013

Majority of the women workers (72 percent) revealed that working condition at workplace is very unhygienic and painful. They live under unhygienic environment which results dangerous diseases and health disaster. Only 28 percent stated that workplace is hygienic.

Occupational Health Hazard of the Women Workers

Due to globalization, new occupational health hazards are increasingly spreading to developing countries. In particular, workers in the informal economy often face occupational hazards and do not have adequate occupational health services. Vulnerable workers, such as children, women, elderly workers, disabled workers, and migrant workers, in many developing countries are involved in the informal economy and are not able to access occupational health services. Workplace environmental hazards are therefore a threat to a large proportion of the world population. Other than the home environment, the workplace is the setting in which many people spend the largest proportion of their time. The following table 6 depicts the various occupational health hazard faced by the women workers.

Table -6 Occupational Health Hazard of the Women Workers at Work Place

Hazard	Frequency	Percentage
Exposure to dust	27	17.8
Noise Pollution	31	20.4
Eye Problems	14	9.2
Psychological stress	13	8.6
Respiratory diseases	18	11.8
Occupational accident	11	7.2
Heat exposure	21	13.8
Allegery/Skin diseases	17	11.2
Total	152	100.0

Source: Filed Survey, 2013

It is found that the selected women of the study got exposed to various health issues. Many of them were found to have two or more problems. Noise pollution was a big health threat faced by nearly 20 percent of the women. The bamboo weavers sit on the roads and their job all through the day and sometimes it extends to evening hours also. All the automobiles passing by, the noise from laths, small factories and other companies throughout the day causes hearing problems. As they sit in open place, they are exposed to heat and dust throughout. These also lead to eye problem and respiratory diseases. Occupational accidents are also not very uncommon. Around 11 percent stated that they have skin diseases. Most of the women workers face skin diseases because of substantial exposure to sunrays at the work place.

Conclusion

The study revealed that the women working in unorganized sector are living a life below their satisfaction. The low earnings of these women cannot meet their daily needs. They work for long hours under the most exploitative conditions subjecting them to health risk. Most of these women are illiterate and ignorant about health and hygiene. They do not keep themselves clean nor do they practice personal hygiene. They do not take bath every day. Even after working in untidy work spot for a day long they do not take bath nor change their dress. Houses are also not kept clean. They live in unclean surroundings. Many houses did not have separate toilets or washing areas. Open ditches were there right in front of their house and there were no place for waste disposal. They live there and their children play around in such dirty surrounding. They are unaware of the threat emanating from living in such horrible situation. It poses great health hazard to all people living there. It is therefore recommended that services need to be provided to improve their situation. It was found that heat stress, noise, dust related problem, vibration and stress problem are prevalent in the work place and are common problems faced by the respondents.

People need to be educated on various aspects with respect to their living

condition, sanitation, drinking water, keeping the house and surrounding clean and other aspects related to health. The programmes initiated by the government have not trickled down to these poor women. Their illiteracy is the main reason which keeps them in the dark. Though we boast about women empowerment in many forums, there is no such thing happening among this group. They still work very hard to earn a living. The situation should change. They also should be brought to the main stream of development and this would help them to live a decent life.

Suggestions

- ◆ The Government must concentrate on the issues relating to unorganized sector not merely from a welfare point of view but from the angle of regulation of employment and to guarantee a minimum of earnings for the workers.
- ◆ The government must formulate economic and fiscal policies so that they will have an effect on the informal economic sector which will in turn affect the health risks of women working in this sector.

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