

Research Article

Challenges Faced by Migrant Women in Informal Sector – A Review

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ABSTRACT

Women are the most vulnerable sections of workers in the informal sector. The reasons of their vulnerability are low economic status, little or no access to institutional training, lack of skills due to lower level of literacy and lack of awareness. Women face multiple constraints while working in informal sector which compel them to live a life full of compromises. The present article discusses women in informal sector and their challenges. The article does not cover all the challenges that women face but focuses on those that are viewed as most critical.

Objective: To identify various challenges faced by migrant women in informal sector in India.

Methodology: A structured review was performed to identify various challenges faced by migrant women in informal sector particularly in India.

Keywords: Women, Informal sector, Migrant workers, Domestic workers, Unemployment, Challenges, Migration

INTRODUCTION

According to National Sample Survey (NSS), the term ‘migrant’ refers to a household person whose last usual place of residence (UPR) anytime in the past was different from the present place of enumeration. The Indian Constitution Article 19 provides people basic freedom to move freely within the country and the right to reside and settle in the place of their choice. Poverty, unemployment and helplessness force people to leave their place of origin and to go to unknown places to work in extremely difficult condition (Srinivasan and Illango, 2012).

Varennnes (2003) states that living in host states, where they may not master the official language(s), are unfamiliar with the workings of the legal system and administration, detached from traditional support and family networks, exposed to a society with ways of life or cultures which they may find at times alien; they may face trials that can leave them disoriented and disturbed. Migration streams in India have been dominated by females, women constitute 66.5% of total migration flows (Marayama and Mitra, 2001). Among migrant workers, women migrant workers are the most vulnerable section (UNICEF, 2013). Women become migrant worker for a number of push factors. The most common push factors include low wage, unfavourable environment and husband's wage not enough to support the family and familial pressure on a daughter, and they are usually employed in domestic work because of having low skills (Muhammed, 2015). Domestic workers constitute one of the largest women sectors in India (Planning Commission, Government of India, 2010). They also represent one of the largest numbers of workers in the informal economy of the country. According to Indian NSS data, there were 65.4 million female workers in 2001, showing a substantial issue in the number of female workers.

Informal sector is the primary source of employment for women in most of the developing countries like India (Chen, 2001). The term informal sector often implies to a large number of women involved in various employment such as papad making, bindi rolling, self-employment programmes like selling vegetables, employment in household enterprises and small units, agricultural workers, labour on construction sites, domestic work, handicrafts, khadi and village industries, handloom weaving and sericulture and others (Sharma, 2012; Fathima Adeela Beevi, 2014). For the majority of women, participation in the informal sector is a survival strategy as they take over aspects of household maintenance that men can no longer afford (Mohapatra, 2012). Women in informal sector are usually identified as rag pickers, beauticians, construction labourers, domestic workers, garment workers and vendors (Kumar, 2014). Women do not have choice what to work or not to work because of the need of income. Only opportunities are present in informal sector of low paid jobs where they do not have possibilities of betterment, advancement of training which enable them to enter in better jobs in their future (Mahapatro, 2010). The aim of the present article is to discuss various challenges faced by migrant women.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

Conell (1984) stated that female migration is primarily a response to real and perceived spatial inequalities in socio-economic opportunities that are themselves the result of uneven sectoral and regional development. Among socio-economic factors, poverty is the main reason why women migrate from rural to urban regions

(Srinivasan and Illango, 2013). The economic hardships in the form of poverty and lack of employment opportunities force them to migrate for survival. Therefore, women may be compelled to migrate owing to their poor economic conditions (Acharya, 2003). Certain forms of domestic work such as cleaning toilets and sanitation-related activities are related to women of lower caste, whereas better paid jobs as household cooks is rendered difficult for them due to the caste and social stratification (Bhattacharya and Sinha, 2009). Another factor is illiteracy. Participation of women in getting education is low, as the culture in India, usually, suggests to promote the participation of getting education for men is more important than women. This makes them vulnerable while working as they are not aware about their rights. In a study, it was found that a considerable proportion of migrant women (53% from 5,179 women) did not receive formal education (Yadlapali *et al.*, 2014).

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

Major sections of women migrate to work as a construction worker. As they are less educated, they are not cautious about different preventive measures due to which they suffer from mental agony and psychological strain. Also, they have poor language skills as they come from diverse background which prevents them from understanding safety measures given (Jayakrishnan *et al.*, 2013). Musculoskeletal problem is the commonest health problem among women engaged in 'papad-making' industry because of their odd working postures (Roy and Sengupta, 2008). This may be explained by the fact that their work required them to remain in a bent position for many hours at a stretch, often in an overcrowded, ill-ventilated and poorly illuminated room. The neck was the commonest anatomical area to be affected (Saha *et al.*, 2010). Due to lack of awareness, none of the women bindi rollers wears gloves or masks while working (Rupali *et al.*, 2012). Women bindi rollers inhale tobacco dust while working due to which they are at risk of genotoxic hazards (Shukla *et al.*, 2011). In a study by Yadlapali (2009), it was found that the problem of hypertension (called as *bp* in the community) is prevalent among women migrant workers due to the tension of unemployment. In a case study of a woman named Gomiben, a 36-year-old widow street vendor, migrated from Gujarat a few decades ago, now lives in Delhi, explained that vendors have the habit of wearing old second-hand clothes, she knows this causes infections but her counterparts does not know due to lack of awareness (Sharma and Konwar, 2014).

WORKING AND WAGES CONDITIONS

Sharma (2009) noticed that many studies have suggested that there are no standard norms that decide working conditions for migrant workers, which also specified

that working hours do not exist for many domestic workers, and they do not get any rest during the day whereas others may not be given proper food or living space. As informal workers carry out their work in less formal structures, they do not enjoy the protection of the law. As a result, they are not protected by employment laws, may not receive benefits such as pensions, sick pay and health insurance and may work in unsafe conditions with unpredictable work schedules and receiving very low wages in comparison to workers under formal contracts (ILO, 2014). In a study conducted by Bora (2014), it was found that on an average the workers worked for 11 months in 1 year, lengthening of the working day and increasing the number of working days are common practices in self-owned enterprises. Another study, conducted by Madhumathi (2013) reported that working and wage conditions vary across locations and geographical areas, depending on the economic and social characteristics of the employers and employees. Woman has to work beyond working hours, even in advanced stages of pregnancy, and there is no leave (Sengupta, 2013). Besides this, working environment affects mental health of women, usually the boss of women in informal sector is unsympathetic towards her and expects too much work which is not under the capacity of women creates tension, fear and anxiety in the mind of women, ultimately results in headache, blood pressure and others (Reshmi *et al.*, 2014).

SEXUAL HARRASSMENT

In India, in every 51 min, a woman is reported to be sexually harassed, and in every 26 min, a woman is sexually molested (Srinivasan, 1998). Majority of women workers in informal sector come from those sections of the society which need income at any cost. Because of this, they get ready to work at any income which makes them vulnerable to sexual harassment as they get less pay in comparison to men (Goel *et al.*, 2011). Since industrialisation, women working in factories have had to endure sexual comments and demands by bosses and co-workers at the price for economic survival (Akhtar, 2013). The fact is that its pernicious effects are visible globally discounts any effort to view it with less gravity than it deserves (Srinivasan, 1998). Women do not report harassment for a variety of reasons ranging from a fear of retaliation or disbelief to a fear of losing one's job or making the situation worse (Loy and Stewart, 1984; Cochran *et al.*, 1997; Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1995). A study conducted by Bhattacharya and Korinek (2007) explained a case study of a woman named Munni, a 42-year-old migrant from Uttar Pradesh, it explains that at construction site, contractors exploit women and take advantage of them, and they are also ill-treated because they do not have identity. The common component of migration and trafficking is movement (Sen and Nair, 2004). Pranjali (2013) explained a case study of a 15-year-old girl named Rani, she was working as a construction worker in Guwahati, there someone lured her of giving a good

job in Pune and trafficked her. In a case study of a woman named Anis Fatima Sheikh, now general secretary of Azad Hawkers Union and is executive member of National Association of Street Vendors of India, it is explained that she was harassed by government officials (Bombay Municipal Corporation, BMC officials). One evening when she was going back home, two BMC officials came to collect hafta. As she did not have the required amount, they threw away her vegetables and pushed her on the ground, through which she hurt her head (Gangopadhyay, 2014, WIEGO).

CONCLUSION

The condition of migrant women workers in informal sector deserves urgent attention. Women face serious problems and constraints related to work such as lack of cautious measures, wage discrimination, unhealthy job relationship, absence of medical and accident care and others. Women workers are particularly disadvantaged by out-of-date workforce structures, work place arrangements and attitudes. They are not able to organise themselves and do anything at the work place, as they are at the mercy of employers. They are ignorant about the rules and regulations that changes over time. So, there is need to create awareness among them to overcome these problems.

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