



Gender, work, and informality: women in India's unorganised sector

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Abstract

Women constitute a substantial proportion of India's workforce in the unorganized sector, yet their labour remains largely invisible, undervalued, and insecure. Despite their crucial contribution to household survival and national economic activity, women engaged in informal employment continue to face persistent challenges such as low wages, absence of social security, unsafe working conditions, occupational health risks, and limited access to legal protection. This is a conceptual paper where the sociological and social work approaches are used to critically study the issue of women working in the unorganized sector of India. Using the concepts of feminist sociology, the labour market segmentation theory and the theory of social reproduction, the paper will examine the structural forces that influence female involvement in informal labour. It also identifies state policies and labour laws concerning informal employment and shows the persistent divide between the policy agenda and actual conditions of women laborers. In the paper, the author believes that in order to deal with the vulnerability of women in the informal economy, gender sensitive labour policies, proper institutional mechanisms as well as long term community based social work interventions are needed.

Keywords: gender, informal sector, women workers, unorganized labour, feminist sociology, India

1. Introduction

The place of work in sociological analysis is central since it can be directly related to the question of identity, social status, power, and economic survival. Under the impact of globalisation, liberalisation, and change in technology, the nature and organisation of work in modern India have changed radically. The continuation and growth of informal or unorganised employment has been one of the greatest product of such processes. However, unlike early development theories which forecasted gradual decrease in informality over the growth of the economy, informal sector still prevails in the labour market of India.

The unorganised sector employs more than ninety percent of India's workforce and contributes substantially to national income. Women form a large proportion of this workforce, particularly in low-paid, insecure, and labour-intensive occupations. Despite their numerical strength, women's work in the informal sector remains undervalued and largely excluded from policy and academic attention. Their labour has often been viewed as an addition to household earnings instead of a saving activity, which supports the marginal position in the economy.

The concentration of women in informal jobs is entrenched in the social structures that pervade the society like patriarchy, caste hierarchy, inequality among classes and cultural patterns of gender roles. Poor access to education, training on skills, and formal jobs drive women to informal jobs, which may seem to be in time with house chores. This has led to a high rate at which women are overrepresented in precarious jobs that are typified by low wages, job insecurity and the absence of social protection.

As a sociological phenomenon, informal employment of women cannot be explained as just an economic phenomenon. It is a symptom of larger forces of social exclusion, power relations and structural inequality. The informal sector offers a crucial place to study the intersection of gender with caste, class and state policy to create labour market results. The following paper is aimed at investigating those dynamics in terms of the conceptual analysis based on the sociological theory and social work practice.

This paper has threefold objectives. The first one is that it seeks to conceptualise the linkage between gender and informality within the Indian context. Second, it aims to examine the role of women in the unorganised sector relying on the critical sociological theories. Third, it discusses what informal employment implicates on the social policy and social work interventions. In such a way the paper will become part of the current arguments on gender justice, labour rights, and social development in India.

2. Conceptualising informality and gender

Informal or unorganised sector is the concept that describes the economic activities not under the regulation of the state. The features of such activities include lack of formal contract, job security, regulated working hours and social security benefits. The informal sector in India has a broad spectrum of jobs such as agricultural work, household work, street selling, building work, home production and small scale trade.

The informal sector has been considered to be a remnant group of the poor and the underdeveloped. However, sociological research has demonstrated that informality is not merely a transitional phenomenon but a structural feature of capitalist

economies. Employers often use informal labour in order to lower costs, enhance flexibility and evade regulatory pressures. This means that even during economic boom, informality is still present.

Gender is significant to influence the engagement into informal economy. The women will be more likely to do informal jobs than men because of the gendered norms that would not allow them access to education, mobility and formal jobs. The labour of women is usually focused on works which can be regarded as continuation of the domestic activities like caring, food processing and handcrafts. These activities are frequently home-based or carried out in unregulated settings, rendering them invisible in official labour statistics.

The feminisation of informal labour can be seen to be both economically necessary and socially limiting. In as much as informal employment gives women the opportunity to generate income, it is a source of exploitation and insecurity. Inability to negotiate decent working conditions and wages is also constrained by the absence of the collective representation and bargaining power of women.

3. Theoretical framework

The informal economy of women could be explained through the sociological theory of feminism, which offers a critical perspective on the role of women within it. According to feminist theorists, labour markets are woven into the social relations of patriarchy where men and women are accorded unequal value in their work. The labour of women is not valued as there is a tendency to relate it to caregiving and housekeeping, which results in the systematic undervaluation of this labour in the market.

The further theory of labour market segmentation accounts for the continuation of inequality in the outcome of labour market. This theory has two segments of labour markets; primary and secondary. The primary segment offers stable employment, higher wages, and opportunities for advancement, while the secondary segment is characterised by low wages, instability, and poor working conditions. Women, particularly those from marginalised social groups, are disproportionately located in the secondary segment.

Social reproduction theory shows that there is interdependence between both paid and unpaid work. The unpaid domestic and care labour of women is very important in reproducing labour force and supporting the economy. But this contribution is still very obscure in economic accounting and policy discussion. The social reproduction causes women to be restricted to insecure and low-paid jobs, which further disturbs the fact that women are contained within informal labor.

Combined, these theoretical approaches help to understand the idea that informal employment of women is not a decision by an individual but is motivated by structural factors and institutional setups. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective policies and interventions.

4. Literature review

Research into women in India's unorganized sector highlights a staggering paradox while women comprise roughly 94% of

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the female workforce in India, their labour is frequently characterized as "invisible", "unskilled" and "marginalized".

The following literature review summarizes the care themes, major scholars and seminal reports that define the field.

Pioneering reports and foundation studies

To understand the baseline of this research, these landmark" documents are essential:

- **Shramshakti Report (1900):** The first-comprehensive report of self-employed women and those in the informal sector. It remains the foundational text for highlighting the health hazards and extreme vulnerability of women workers.
- **NCEUS Reports (Sengupta Committee, 2007-2009):** These provide the statistical Backbone for the informal/unorganized" distinction in India, detailing the decent work deficit" faced by women.
- **World Bank (1991):** Early studies established that while Indian women are central to economic survival, often the "poorest of the poor" within the informal economy.

5. Key research themes

Current academic literature generally organizes the experience of women in the unorganized sector into your primary "crises?"

5.1 The Wage gap and Feminization of Poverty" Studies by Papola (2007) and Rustagi (2003) demonstrate that even when performing the same tasks as men (e.g in construction or agriculture), women are consistently paid 30-50% less. This is often justified by employers through the myth of a "lesser Physical strength" or by Categorizing women's work as "unskilled".

5.2 Occupational segregation and invisibility

Literature focuses heavily on specific sub-sectors where women are concentrated:

- **Home-based workers:** Majumdar (2005) and chen (2001) explore the household trap," where women roll beedis, stitch garments, or make papad at home. This work is often not counted in rational statistics because it is performed within the Private domestic Sphere.
- **Domestic work:** Neetha (2004, 2014) is a leading voice here, highlighting that while domestic work provides income, it lacks legal recognition, leading to long hours and high susceptibility to harassment.
- **Construction:** Research by Suran and Sandhewar (1990) Shows women are often restricted to carrying loads (coolie work) while men handle skilled tasks like masonry.

5.3 The "Double Burden" (Productive vs. Reproductive)

A recurring theme is the Dual Role. Authors like Neha (2012) argue that women in the unorganized sector work "triple shifts"

- Economic work (Informal Labour)
- Unpaid Care Work (Cooking, cleaning)
- Community Management - This results in what is termed Time Poverty" where women have zero leisure time, leading to chronic health issues.

5.4. Lack of social security and legal protection

Since these workers fall outside the Factories Act On the ESI Act, they have no maternity benefits an old age pensions Gupta and Prakash (2019) emphasize the absence of restrooms, crèches, and protective gear at worksites makes the unorganized sector a "hostile environment for female biology and safely.

6. Research gap and contribution

Despite the wealth of literature on the challenges faced by women workers in the unorganized sector, there is a need for more localized and Context - Specific Studies. Although the current literature is a generalized survey, narrower research of a certain region, industries as well as sectors may give finer details of how women are fraught with particular circumstances.

7. Women in India's unorganized sector

Informal occupation among the women in rural and urban India is varied. Women in the rural regions mainly engage in agricultural labor, which is involved in activities like sowing, harvesting and post-harvest processing. They are also poorly acknowledged as even though women work a great deal in agricultural activities, their labour is either underpaid or unpaid.

Domestically, women are widely used in cities as household workers, construction workers, street peddlers as well as home based workers in the garment and handicraft industries. These are jobs that are long working hours, low paying jobs and lack employment security. Particularly domestic work is characterized by informality and absence of legal protection which cause women to be susceptible to exploitation and abuse. Women are also influenced by intersectional issues of caste, class, religion, and region in the informal economy. Dalit and minority women are usually relegated to the most precarious and stigmatized labor. There are other problems associated with the migrant women workers such as housing insecurity, absence of social networks and non-inclusion in the welfare schemes.

Women informal workers are very concerned with health risks and occupational hazards. Women who are exposed to risky materials, without sanitation amenities and maternity benefits are negatively impacted in terms of their physical and psychological health. In spite of these, women are still engaged in informal work in an attempt to make the ends meet.

8. State, Policy, and Informality

The Indian state has also come up with a number of labour laws and social security schemes that help to improve the status of informal workers. These comprise laws on minimum wages, maternity and social security of the unorganized employees. Over the last few years, attempts have been undertaken to take social protection to informal workers by having specific welfare programmes.

Nevertheless, the measures are not effective because of the low level of implementation, awareness, and administration

barriers. The various policies have been gender-neutral in nature, and they do not take into consideration the unique needs and limitations of women. Consequently, social security privileges are usually locked out of women informal workers.

From a sociological perspective, the persistence of informality reflects the state's ambivalent approach to labour regulation in the context of economic growth. Addressing women's vulnerability in informal employment requires not only legal reforms but also political will, institutional accountability, and gender-sensitive policy design.

9. Problems faced by the women in unorganized sector

Women workers in the unorganized sector face a multitude of challenges and problem due to the nature of their employment and gender-based discrimination.

- The women in unorganized sector tend to make less money in comparison with their male counterparts whenever they do the same work. The reason behind this wage gap is the lack of regulations on minimum wages, and bargaining power, such that women can hardly afford their most essential needs and enhance their socio-economic conditions.
- Women have been experiencing exploitation and harassment. They might be treated unfairly, abused either verbally or physically and sexually in their places of work.
- Female employees too who experienced job insecurity. They can either execute temporary or casual jobs where they are not contracted thus prone to losses of jobs, termination at any time and unreliable sources of income. This causes them to lack job security, thus compromising their financial security and future planning.
- Most women in the unorganized sector do not or have little access to social protection schemes including health insurance, maternity benefits and pension Schemes. This will lack of social security subjects them to financial takeovers in cases of emergencies, illness and retirement leaving them without proper Support systems.
- Women on workplace typically being exposed to hazardous and unhealthy environment They might not have access to adequate sanitation systems, protective clothing and safe working conditions. This makes them highly exposed to occupational hazards, accidents and health problems.
- In the unorganized sector, gender-based discrimination continues to restrict the women in terms of skill development, promotion and career growth. They also face stereotypes, prejudices and restrict access to training programs and resources thus impeding their professional development and potential.
- The unpublished women workforce is usually obliged with the unpaid care work and home duties on top of their paid jobs. Striking a balance between their roles is a major challenge, which leads to both the physical and mental stress and insufficient time to be dedicated to personal and professional growth.

10. Findings

- a) **Prevalent issues-** The paper identifies several prevalent issues faced by women, working in the unorganized sector in India. These are low wages, Job insecurity and gender-based discrimination. The Challenges have serious economic consequences on people and their lives.
- b) **Diverse occupations-** The paper explains that the unorganized sector occupies women in diverse types of jobs and sectors, such as domestic, Street Vending, garment and informal manufacturing work. This multiculturalism highlights the extent of their role in the economy.
- c) **Adverse working conditions-** The results indicate that the working conditions that women in the unorganized sector work under are unfavorable, including the long working hours, low benefits, absence of social security, and access to healthcare and education.
- d) **Intersectional nature of discrimination-** The paper goes deeper into the intersectionality of gender-based discrimination, meaning that such aspects as caste, class and religion contribute to the Vulnerabilities experienced by these women This inter Sectionalist complicates their problems further.

11. Suggestions

- The paper suggests policy intervention steps that would enhance the lives of woman in the unorganized sector. These include initiatives to raise minimum wages, strengthen labour rights, and provide Social protection measures.
- The labor proposes encouraging programs of skill development that are specific to women in the unorganized sector. Such programs have the capacity to equip them with skills required to improve on their employability and to venture into entrepreneurship.
- The research suggests that there is the need to extend social security benefits to the women in the unorganized sector. This covers healthcare, maternity, old age pension and insurance Coverage.
- The research highlights the need to promote gender equality at the workplace. The campaign of awareness and inclusive policies will help to make the world a more inclusive place when it comes to empowering women.
- Compared to men, study is essential in ensuring that women can enjoy equal access to quality education and vocational training that will help them secure well-paying and dignified jobs.
- More respectful and inclusive workplaces can be achieved by creating awareness and sensitizing the stakeholders regarding the rights and contribution of women in the unorganized sector.

12. Implications for sociology and social work

The informal employment of women gives important information into how social inequality operates in contemporary India. To sociology, it highlights the need to

study work outside of formal jobs and realise the significance of gender, caste and class in the formation of labour markets.

The social work interventions would be crucial in assisting the women informal workers to deal with the challenges they experience. Women bargaining power and access to social protection can be improved with the help of community-based methods that can be used to create awareness, train on the law, develop skills, and organise themselves.

The state institutions, civil society organisations, and social workers should collaborate to develop inclusive labour policies and secure their successful implementation. Gender-sensitive social work practice would help to empower women workers and enable social justice.

13. Conclusion

The peripheral status of women in the unorganised sector in India is an interplay between the gender norms, economic structures and the policies of a state. Informal employment offers women a chance to earn livelihood, but it also renders them vulnerable to serious insecurity and exploitation. In this paper, we have attempted to argue that a comprehensive approach to the issue of vulnerability of women in the informal economy should be based upon a combination of sociological knowledge and social work. Dignity, security, and social justice to female workers are required through gender sensitive labour policies, effective implementation mechanisms and long term interventions within the community.

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