



Working Women in India: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

In India, women have no doubt been participating in the economic activities and working women as such is not a new class woman, as they have always been working in the fields and at crafts by the side of their men. Even women working in the urban areas is not a new thing, for women from the economically lesser privileged strata society have been working since long for wages in factories and mines, at construction sites, and as menial servants and domestic helpers. It is the decade women, especially the married ones, belonging to the middle and upper class families, whose taking up of home gainful employment is comparatively a recent phenomenon. The educated working women constitute rather a recently emerging social group whose emergence in it is an indication of the significant socio economic and politico legal changes taking place in our country.

KEYWORDS

1.1 Introduction

A woman in India stand today on the threshold of a new era in their endeavor to become full citizen's assured of human rights and dignity. They seek integration into the national mainstream as equal partners in progress and development. As per our constitution women have equal rights with man, equality before the law, equality of opportunity for education and employment. These rights are guaranteed as fundamental rights. Three major developments in recent decades have been responsible for changes in the status of women in India. The first of these has been the imparting higher education to women. With each generation, more women are going in for higher education. The second major development has been the entry women in the labor force. In the pre-industrial era, women for the lower economic groups were employed in family trades and occupation. But the middle class women were solely devoted their household duties. The third development has been entry of married women into the labor force.

1.2 Development of Women

These developments have been opposed by many because the entry of women, particularly married women, to the labor force, gives rise to a conflict between the two roles of women that of a housewife and an earner. By tradition and custom the role of women in society has been that of daughter, wife and mother. In such a traditional setting, one can hardly expect women to seek a change in their roles, when if they sought changes, these would be slow in coming.

At the other extreme are those accepting these developments are inevitable for the emancipation of women. This group is likely to permit women to enjoy greater privileges in the matter of employment and social intercourse. The women in this group would have, more often than not, the right to change or seek to change their roles from that of a housewife, entirely devoted to the management of the household, that of the earner housewife or an extreme cases, to that of being only earner. Between these two extremes is the group, which is permissive with regard to some areas of behavior but restrict in others. For example, while women may be permitted to take up employment, some restrictions may be laid on other social activities. Again, the areas of control may differ accord-

ingly to whether or not the women are married. For example, while more restrictions may be placed on married women, there may be restriction on the unmarried.

In the tradition and custom bound society, women will not enter the labor force. Even if, under the pressure of a changing social climate, women were not prohibited forms seeking employment, only a minority would tend to be employed. In a progressive society there would be a greater scope for women to enter the labor force and in reality, a large proportion of woman form this society would be employed.

1.3 Working women in organized and unorganized sector

By and large, on the bass of micro-level observation of women workers, it would appear that women go to work because of the irregular nature of employment that their men are involved in and the low incomes they make. By taking to work these women feel that they also supplement the family's income. As regards the kind of work opportunities open to women working in the unorganized sector, very often the choice is made for them in the sense that they go for the types of work their relatives or neighbors are involved in. In large art, the work for women consists of a narrow range of non-descriptive jobs, mostly calling for unskilled labor and manual strength. One of the important consequences of working in the unorganized sector is that in wage payments discrimination exists on the basis of sex. In unorganized sector there is some opportunities and advancement for men where as it is virtually dead end for women.

1.4 Employment in organized industry

Employment in organized industry has done much to draw women out of the family and household which had hitherto to make up their world⁴. The wages earned through industrial employment have given them measure of independence, besides contributing handsomely to household earnings. However, their prospects in the organized sector have come under a cloud even before the full impact of such employment has become manifest. Rapid changes in technology, automation and the curtailment of employment have drastically reduced their opportunities for work in the organized sector. In traditional industries such as jute, mining and cotton textiles, which were the major employers of women's labor, have suf-

ferred a sharp setback. There seems to be no place for them in high technology industries, except in some sections of assembly and packaging, which are low technology jobs. The introduction of microelectronic and information technologies has made their position even more vulnerable. Women with their low skills would be of no use in this new order.

Another noticeable trend in women's employment is the growing presence of women in the service sector especially in transportation, communication and financial services. Overall, the opportunities are better in the banks, public financial institutions, insurance, post and telegraphs and travel and tourism industry. The greatest difficulty in understanding the working women and their problems has been caused by taking them as a homogeneous group while they constitute a heterogeneous group, comprising of distinct as well as different categories of women workers. As such, they and their problems cannot be discussed in one stride due to limitation of time and owing to the fact that the educated working women are a new class of workers.

1.5 Socio economic conditions of women

It is heartening too not that women in India are now acquainted to their responsibilities in shaping the economic and other aspects of national life. For centuries, women were discriminated against men in every walk of life and were the subject of ridicule and contempt. Even various religions relegated women to a subordinate position. They have never been able to achieve an independence status.

Gender is an important variable in all-human interactions. It plays a crucial role in all activities of life. Women especially tend to become victim of cruel gender discrimination in most walks of life. This start right from conception of a girl is socialized in ways that preclude their participation in a wide range of activities outside the domestic arena.

Social change over the decades has brought about certain positive changes in the way women's roles are perceived. However the changes have generally not been instrumental in bringing about changes in women's participation in developmental activities. The factors that contributed to women's participation in developmental activity relate both early socialization as well as latter experiences.

The Constitution of India guarantees to all its citizens' equality of status and opportunity and equality of opportunities in all matters relating to employment and opportunities in any office under the state. It forbids discrimination in respect of any employment or office under the State on the grounds of religion, caste, sex, descent, and place of work, residence or any one of them.

Thus legally, women now enjoy the same right and benefits as men. Various laws have been enacted to give equal right to women in respect of marriage, divorce, inheritance and franchise in order to help women overcome their disabilities. Child marriage was abolished over 40 years ago unequal laws against women were changed.

Indeed, several efforts have been made by the State to make the constitutional dream a reality and to bring women out of the kitchen and the house into the mainstream of socio economic life of the country. Various high level committees have been set up to examine these problems, but the fact remains that women still suffer in practice from a number of disabilities brought on by the mental attitude of men, particularly those who are employers. This is most evident amongst rural folk whose main occupation is agriculture.

The International Women's Year has helped to focus public attention on the problems relating to the status of women and a National committee under the Chairmanship of Prime Minister to India has been set up to launch various programmes for the advancement of the women. The impact of these measures is visible today, for the Indian women are participat-

ing to an increasing extent in the National and International spheres. She has entered practically every profession and academic field. Over 20,000 highly qualified women occupy posts of doctors, architects, writers, and artist and office administrators; there are 23,000 women are working as teachers in Universities and 94,000 graduates are working as teachers in schools.

There is another side of picture the rights acquired with so much effort remains ineffective for a large proportion of women, steeped as they are in ignorance, tradition and social taboos, many of which are cruel. In fact, sometimes it is the women who cling to these taboos and oppose change. Although few total women are aware of their rights, yet they have no courage, knowledge or skill to make use of them. In our country child marriage is still prevalent at rural places and the dowry system touches eternal. One of the main causes for this state of affairs is the ignorance of women due to lack of education.

The unique characteristic features of India society are its high stratification and the marks of stratification are visible bodily when it comes to women. Any analysis on the role of women in social life should reckon their role in social life in the upper strata of the society is quite different from the role in the lower strata. Difference of this kind is evident in every complex society by its eccentrically more rigid character of India social stratification makes it more conspicuous. The considerations of regional differences also play a pivotal role in Indian social life. For instance, women in the village of South India enjoy greater freedom of movement than their counterparts in North India. During the last hundred years, several casts and communities have attempted a kind of upward social movement, which has been described as Sanskritization. This is a process, which a number of lower caste strata tried to adopt to seek to improve their status in society by adopting the customs and traditions of upper castes. It had adverse effect on women and brought more changes in their position, particularly at the middle level of the caste hierarchy. The age of marriage tend to be lowered remarriages for widows are given up, the dowry is souring and women are being discouraged for going out. All this being had done in imitation of the customs and traditions of the upper caste.

Women, as one half of the human population have had a tremendous role to play in the synergic process of social change. The development of a society is a much dependent upon women as men.

Interestingly, off late the political field is showing that keenness in this sphere thus women's welfare had become women's empowerment as an important slogan. There are many activities both from the Government Organization directed towards the goal of the women's empowerment.

Parents generally have a lot of ambition and hopes for their sons; they only worry about how comfortably to settle their daughters in a good marriage. This attitude leads to many consequences such as i. Boys education get priority ii. Even when girl and women work at jobs the are seldom permitted to be in the rough competitive world of commerce and trade iii. Women have to work hard and earn for livelihood, contribute for enabling to her to the comforts and luxuries of the family for many generations.

These three important external factor education, occupation and income have constantly been detrimentally to women's active participation in the developmental activity.

1.6 Status of women in India

The status of women in India varies greatly from trade to state and among between various communities in a particular state. It would need several volumes to do justice to this subject. For instance in Kerala and Meghalaya, the society is matriarchal whereas in the rest of India Society is patriarchal and the law prevails. Thus, women in Kerela and Maghalaya have

more rights, independence, prevail and respect than women in other parts of India. No man would ever dare describe women in Kerala as mere chattel.

Women's economic status in India since ancient times has been that of traditional in nature without any real economic participation neither within the family structure nor at the state level, since time immemorial, they had been at the disposal and mercy of the head of the family or male members for fulfilling their economic needs and requirements. Above all, they have no voice in the economic matters pertaining to their family too.

A recent demand for the provision of greater opportunities outside the four walls of the households is a step on the direction of women's emancipation. Efforts are under way to shift women from the traditional role to neo traditional. By the way, women are reinforcing their right for equality with men in almost all fields such as education, employment, health, and welfare.

Since 1950, the proportion of adult women joining the labor force has risen in both developed and developing countries through much more markedly in the former⁶. In developing countries, employment has been growing faster at industry and services level than agriculture. The sector distribution of the female labor force has been shifting in accordance with this pattern, moving into industry distinctly faster than the male labor force. As a result, the proportion of women in the industrial labor force in developing countries has been rising. While the increase took place, the overall share of women in the total labor force remained constant at around thirty-two per cent.

Case studies of number of countries divulge reveal that developing countries where the educational levels of women are lower than the men and the earning are different between men and women have been observed. Marginal earning differentials have also been noticed at identical level of education of men and women.

1.7 Socio economic characteristics of women

The important characteristics of women workers, one difference to be expected between women in the labor force and those outside would be in respect of their age. The entry of middle class Indian women into the labor force is a relatively recent phenomenon. The labor forces were younger and the women outside are relatively older.

An educated woman is more likely to get a job than less educated women. The changes of educated women securing a well-paid job are also brighter. From a social viewpoint, it is usually assumed, if not always accepted, that one of the primary aims in encouraging women to go in for higher education is to equip them for a job so that in time of need, they can fend for themselves. Thus, more collegiate than non-collegiate women would be in the labor force, if a woman irrespective of her academic education goes in for vocational training, it must be a very clear indication of her intention of work.

It is usually observed that a considerable number of Christian women enter the labor force. In contrast, fewer Hindu and Muslim Women generally viewed in the role of a housewife, seek employment. The difference in the perception of the Hindu and Muslim women in the conservative role, and the Christian in the role of the progressive wage earner may be mainly attributed to the underlying assumption. The latter enjoys more privileges in the matter of employment and social intercourse because of the social patterns which more or less replicate of the progressive western culture.

Age and marital status are highly inter-related attributes. The older a woman is the more likely is that she will be married. A large proportion of unmarried women compared to married women would be in the labor force.

In the very small family household work may be limited and consequently women would have some free time at their disposal to be utilized in employment. In the large family, there may be other people to look after domestic duties when one of the women is out on work.

1.8 Woman in the labor force

It was earlier summarized that the economic condition of the household was a major factor influencing the labor force status of the women. More specially, a woman in the labor force was probably drawn from the lower income group families. Due to the following reasons, supplementing the family income, supporting the family, raising the standard of living, or getting money to meet some specific needs like education of children or siblings. More women in the labor force than outside it said that women should seek work only if there is an economic need. Economic necessity is considered the justification.

Proportionately, more unmarried than married women in the labor force felt at women would work when there is an economic need. However, as regards the circumstances under which women should not work, about an equal proportion of the married and unmarried women gave priority to non-economic factor. While proportionately more women in the age group below 30 years of age felt that women should work for economic reasons, it was proportionately more of those who were 30 years of age or more who said non-economic factors deserved priority.

While a large proportion of non-collegiate women said women should work for economic reasons, collegiate women more often gave non-economic reasons. However, the level of education did not influence their views on the circumstances under which women should not work.

1.9 Problems of women workers

Due to processes of technological changes and of the changed economy, the illiterate, unskilled or semi-skilled women labors have been affected adversely as their demands have been greatly reduced. The major problems that they face are hat of discrimination, of being under debt and of exploitation. The National Committee on Status of Women report points out that the other circumstances which force them to work. The women workers, and to a lesser degree even of the organized sector, suffer from poor wages, discrimination, unexplained fines and deductions in pay, insecurity of job and lack of housing, sanitary and welfare facilities. The women workers of the unorganized sector are exploited much more mainly because this sector is not governed and regulated by the Rules and the Laws that are meant to protect the security and working conditions of labor and provide them with welfare amenities. The working women in the organized sector also suffer from lack of welfare facilities and are exploited in spite of statutory rules and regulations because these laws are directly or indirectly evaded owing to the workers ignorance and absence of effective implementing machinery.

This new social group has emerged gradually right from the phase. When it was considered derogatory for a girl and more so for married women of middle and upper class families to take up paid jobs or professions. In the middle phase when she was permitted to work only under gross economic necessity but in respectable jobs of a teacher, a sector, to the present stage when in increasing number both unmarried and married women are working in almost all kinds of jobs and profession. A woman is found to be employed even in the jobs, which were largely the preserves of men, not only to meet the economic need but also for the satisfaction of their various socio psychological needs and desires. For example some women work because they would like to have an independent income and individual status of their own. They have opportunities and freedom to mix with people. And they fulfill their intellectual needs and senses of achievement, creative work, recognition and fame; to utilize their education and spare time; or to satisfy the urge to e away from the unhappy

atmosphere of home or to overcome frustration in premarital or marital life. They are found to be working also out of love or charm of profession or also because they are no more contented with carrying out merely the traditional roles of a wife and mother and feel that they must contribute more effectively to the society, the single working women living on their own faces with difficulties mainly of inadequate, insecure and inconvenient living accommodation.

The proper eating arrangements, the married ones experience added problems which are related mainly due to the absence of minimizing gadgets and declining advantages. They having an integrated joint family and helpful family members to look after the house and children, increasing scarcity of reliable and trust worthy servants, and the husbands generally not helping the working women in carrying out household jobs.

Some of the problems that single working women face outside home. They are owing to absence of convenient, cheap and safe transport, lack of center for vocational technical and occupational guidance, education and training, lack of opportunities for self-employment, late entry into jobs and lack of facilities for various kinds of premarital counseling and assistance. The married working women face the added problems created by the absence of adequate facilities. Like that of community kitchens or efficiently run cheap canteens, child care service, overtime jobs, long maternity or parents leave without its being considered as a break in service, refresher courses and facilities for reentry into jobs after a few years gap needed for bearing and rearing of the children.

Position of women at work cannot be understood that without reference to the family, then the same is true from trade unions. Here we need to examine certain frequently encountered vicious circles. The trade union leader says that women do not attend meetings or take an active part in the union. He then does not bother to encourage women to attend union meetings and gives low priority to problems relating to women workers. So the women workers see that the union does not do much for them and wonder why they should attend union meeting at all. Then the union leader talking of a women apathetic and do not try to help them. Women, however, form over 20 per cent of trade union membership, and women are joining unions at twice the rate of men. Recently more women have been appointed as trade union officers have either with special responsibility for women members or to general posts within the union.

Sexism in trade union arises in many aspects of union activity. At an obvious level it consists of failure to provide creches at union meetings and conferences or to arrange for the meetings to be held in working hours; giving low priority to disputes affecting women members; or giving low priority recruiting women. It also discourages women when they try to speak at union meetings, with patronizing remarks and sexist's jokes.

1.10 Vocational Training for women

The National Vocational Training Institute (NVTI) Noida (UP) and six Regional Vocational Institutes (RVITs) for women in different parts of India imparted basic and advanced levels of vocational training to women. The Employment Exchanges took special care to cater to the needs of women registered with them. To improve the working condition and increase the employment potential of women, financial assistance is given to voluntary organizations to take up action oriented projects. The projects financed followings are:

- Self-employed Women's Association, Indore, for organizing women workers in the city of Indore.
- Center for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi, for plantation/maintenance of Arjun trees in West Bengal.
- Ahilyadevi Mahila Mandal, Nagpur, for training the women workers in masonry trades.
- Former Development Agency, Chickballapur, Karnataka, for imparting training of women in sheet metal trade.
- Solidarity Movement of India, Idukki, Kerala for holding three Seminars every year for women labor.
- KARUNA, Noinda for training women in lens grinding.
- Gramin Vikas Parishad, Bihar for training women in Masonry trades.
- Manave Sewa Kendra, Varanasi, for organizing women laborers.
- Centre for Development for Disadvantaged People Madras, Tamil Nadu, for holding a four-day workshop on women labor.

1.11 Conclusion

Therefore, it could be concluded from above discussion that in recent years there has been a growing awareness in the country for the need to involve women in development programme in a systematic way. Social change, advancement in education along with the economic need to supplement the family income has brought forward women as a potential labor force in the Indian Economy.

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