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Status of Women Workers in Informal Manufacturing in Mumbai in 1980s

S. Gandhi and S. Banerjee-Guha

Abstract

Status of women workers has undergone changes in many parts of the World. With the policies of liberalisation in a number of developing countries including India, women workers are entering the informal sector in a big way. Evidences indicate that feminisation of labour whether formal or informal, tends to increase during periods of economic crisis coinciding with decline in household income. This increases their relative proportion in the informal and low paid formal sectors. The extent and nature of the above process of feminisation, however, varies spatially as well as temporally depending upon the exposure of the economy to the forces of capitalist growth.

The study examines the marginalisation of women workers in the Indian situation with a historical perspective. Keeping this perspective in the background, it shows that during eighties the status of women workers in Mumbai was extremely peripheral and subordinate. They not only remain segregated horizontally and vertically but they also suffer wage discrimination vis-à-vis their male counterparts. The study suggests that such placements are a result of an economic crisis in general.

1. Introduction

As the process of capitalist growth has differently moulded and monitored the social organisations in the developed and eveloping worlds, status of women workers also has got restructured accordingly. Connotation of gender dimension has been diverse in the Third World countries as they have been exposed to colonial expansion of capital and its post-colonial manifestations, the latter being associated with the policies of import substitution and export-promotion as initially adopted by many countries (Gandhi and Shah, 1991). While these strategies have promoted bi-polarisation and fragmentation of economies giving rise to juxtaposition of formal and informal sectors (Banerjee-Guha, 1985), these have simultaneously influenced the sexual division of labour and placement of women workers. Empirical evidences (Gothoskar, 1992; Roy, 1999; Gandhi, 2000) suggest that women's participation in labour force, whether formal or informal increases during periods of economic crises coinciding with decline in household incomes. Increases in the relative proportion of women as wage earners (Fried, 1998), however is found mainly in the informal or unorganised sector.

Tendencies of feminisation of labour further strengthen under policies of liberalisation with the multinational corporations promoting the new international division of labour in response to the crisis of falling profits (Banerjee-Guha, 1997), aided by the sweeping changes in the field of computer based information technology (Banerjee, 1991). However, the

extent and nature of feminisation of labour varies spatially and temporally depending upon the exposure of the economy to the forces of capitalist growth. Thus, women workers especially young and married are increasingly being preferred to men as observed in Latin American as well as South East and East Asian countries. The extensive growth of 'maquiladoras', the assembly plants promoted by the multinational corporations along the border of the U.S. and Mexico since 1965 exemplify the above situation (Patricia and Kelly, 1998). In case of the less industrialised countries in South Asia and Africa, however, the trends are more diverse as mentioned earlier.

The present study examines the status of women workers in informal manufacturing in Mumbai as observed in late eighties, a period just before the imposition of new economic policy. Based on a questionnaire survey on a sample of 1240 male and female wage earners, the study analyses the status and placement of women workers in the context of structure, composition and typology of informal manufacturing in Mumbai (Gandhi and Banerjee-Guha, 1995, 1998).

2. Industrial Workers in India and Gender Dimensions

Over the years with societal structures undergoing transformation, adoption of new technology and usage of new equipments and devices has also grown. This has led to a systematic exclusion of women workers especially from crucial, prestigious and more rewarding production jobs. Taboos for instance on women using plough or potter's wheel or operating looms still persist in different parts of India (Gandhi and Shah, 1991). The ideas perpetuate in some form or other despite restructuring of many craft activities in contemporary metropolitan economies as observed in Mumbai (Gandhi, 2000, Gandhi and Banerjee-Guha, 2002)). Adoption of the strategy of feminisation in conjunction with deskilling and lowering of wages in response to the changing demand conditions in the transitional politico-economic set-up was noticed in case of jardozi works in northern parts of India during colonial period (Roy, 1999). The overall scenario in the colonial period expressed a gradual decline in involvement of women in craft and other non-agricultural occupations (Gandhi and Shah, 1991). In West Bengal for instance between 1901-51 the number of women workers engaged in such occupations dropped from 1.06 millions to 0.61 millions (Mitra, 1979).

In the early stages of growth of factory industry such as textiles in Mumbai, presence of women workers was noticeable in the unskilled, laborious and low-paid jobs (Gandhi, 2000). However, mechanisation of certain production stages led to retrenchment of women workers in large number. These trends were further reinforced ironically due to unionisation of labour leading to extension of material and social benefits on the one hand and implementation of male biased norms of protection and welfare of labour on the other. These meant that family wage was to be earned by males thereby eliminating women workers from the better paid jobs. In Mumbai for instance the major reason for the reduction in number of women workers was due to restriction imposed on their night work (Gothoskar, 1992). This led in 1937, to a drastic overnight retrenchment of 2200 women spinners out of a total of 10,000 in the cotton textile industry (Gandhi and Shah, 1991).

During post-colonial period women's share of industrial jobs has become small and the rate of their employment sporadic, slow and stagnant (Gandhi and Shah, 1991). Proportion of women workers in textile, jute and mining was reduced from 20, 15 and 38 to 2.5, 2.0 and 5.0 percent respectively (Savara, 1982). Studies analysing data on female work participation over three decades show that there is a trend of displacement of female workers by males (Mukhopadhyay-Ghosh, 1982).

Implementation of the policies of import substitution followed by export-promotion has led to a gradual bi-polarisation of the Indian economy giving rise to the growth of technology intensive industries such as chemicals, pharmaceuticals, engineering, electrical and electronics, rubber and plastic manufacturing etc. All these prefer employing educated and trained male workers in better paid formal jobs. The same process, however, has simultaneously led to increasing employment in informal manufacturing in traditional and non-traditional sectors through a process of fragmentation and a complex dominance -dependent linkage networks with the formal sector (Gandhi, 2000). The latter has helped to absorb the unskilled or semi-skilled, less educated workers drawn from the towns and villages in the rural hinterlands. In this set up women workers have found relatively easy entry in petty trade and service components of the informal sector. They are also preferred in the lower strata of the formal sector especially in tail-end jobs like packing, filling, checking quality control etc. Export led growth has intensified their presence in labour intensive and low paid jobs linked with production of garments, electrical and electronic goods etc. (Banerjee, 1991). Women workers, however, could not enter easily either in the lucrative jobs linked with handling of machinery and maintenance in the formal sector or in their ancillary and auxillary units in the informal sector. Thus, though womens' share in manufacturing industry came up from 8.4% in 1961 to 8.15% in 1981 in India, it actually meant feminisation of certain jobs in conjunction with adoption of strategy of deskilling and devaluation of labour (Gandhi and Shah, 1991). Unlike males, the apparent increase in women's employment in modern industry did not ensure job security and other social benefits, rather exposed them to various situations of discrimination, deprivation, poor working conditions and gender bias set up (Banerjee, 1991).

The above situation is substantiated by the 1981 census reporting 94% of the female workers engaged in unorganised and informal sector (Gothoskar, 1992). The report of the National Commission on Self-employed Women and women employed in the informal sector further corroborates this fact (Shram Shakti, 1988).

3. Women Workers in Informal Manufacturing in Mumbai

Based on primary data the following analysis indicates distinct trends of feminisation in the informal manufacturing in Mumbai in late 1980s with the proportion of women workers being as low as 18.63% (Table 1). Recording a relatively high sex ratio of 130 in 1981, Mumbai's economy has been more masculine than the cities of Latin America, South East or East Asia (Oberai, 1993; Deshpande and Deshpande, 1991).

Typological analysis of the informal manufacturing reiterates the marginal

Table 1: Gender Dimension of Labour in Informal Manufacturing in Mumbai in the late 1980s.

	Total Respondents	Males	Females	Total Adults	Child Labour
Absolute	1240	995	231	1226	14
%	100	18.24	18.63	99.0	1.13

Table 2: Typology of Informal Manufacturing and the Sexual Division of Labour

	% to total number of respondents	% of women to total workers respondents (1240)	% to total women workers (231)
a) Traditional	25.0	10.13	54.55
b) Mixed	42.6	5.4	29.0
c) Modern	32.4	3.1	16.45
Total	**100.0**	**18.63**	**100.00**

placement of women in Mumbai's economy. About 54.55% of the total women workers accounting for 10% of the total sample are found to be engaged in the traditional household activities as against only 29% and 16.45% in the mixed and modern type of manufacturing, respectively. Their proportion in the total sample is as low as 3 to 5 percent (Table. 2).

Within the broad typology of informal manufacturing, product specific gender division of labour reveals varying patterns of peripheral placement of women workers.

a) In traditional low wage, less skilled type of activities like broom making and bidi rolling, producing low-value products the women workers constitute absolute majority and account for 48% of the total female respondents. They, however, can not compete to enter craft activities producing high value products like jewellery making, diamond cutting and polishing etc. Being deprived of the opportunity to either inherit skills or sustain long period of apprenticeship and graduation, they largely remain unseen in such activities (Table 3). However, mechanisation of the production process and exposure of these activities to export markets especially since 1990, has created opportunities towards appropriation of their labour in recent days leading to greater participation of women workers in the units in export promotion zones such as SEEPZ in Andheri.

In moderate to low value products such as pottery and jardozi work women are either peripherally engaged or remain almost invisible as they contribute to laborious, non-prestigious jobs such as carrying and kneading of clay, arranging kilns, polishing pots or hand-embroidery and hemming, etc. respectively.

b) In mixed type of activities women can enter easily in home-based production

like making of papad, pickles, paper-bags, card-board boxes and miscellaneous items like rakhis, kites, garlands etc. However, in workshop based activities, such as, garment manufacturing or manufacturing of leather products, they are marginalised both numerically as well as in terms of status vis-a-vis the male workers (Table 3).

c) In modern type of activities, the female workers account for only 9% of the total respondents, numbering only 38. In plastic manufacturing their proportionate share marginally rises to 10.7%. Increased fragmentation of production processes have facilitated juxtaposition of workshop-based as well as home- based production especially in plastic manufacturing thereby leading to relatively more absorption of women workers and appropriation of home-space, electricity as well as family labour. This study shows that except for the 34 women workers employed in workshop-based modern type of activities, the rest of the sample belongs to the home-based type of activities.

The study emphasises that informal women workers in manufacturing face horizontal and vertical segregation as well as associated wage discrimination and subordination vis-a-vis their male counterparts even in the metropolitan environment of Mumbai. Despite having possibility of nurturing skills and acquiring education and training they are restricted to the domain of household chores and unpaid or low paid production processes under the pretext of social taboos or systematised gender biased interpretation of their societal roles. Consequently, a large majority of these women workers (90.4%) having less or no skill earn a monthly income of less than Rs. 500 as noted in late 1980s which often drops down to less than Rs. 300 in case of those having part-time and intermittent work. Only 8.8% of the women workers from the sample having ability of putting longer working hours earn a monthly income of Rs. 500 to 1100 and thus are placed in the category of less than average level income earners in the general hierarchical profile of informal manufacturing (Gandhi, 2000). A negligible proportion of women workers (0.8%) either engaged in better paid modern types of activities or intraditional and mixed types earn more than Rs. 1100 to 1500 per month.

Generally, males predominate in the age group of 20-40 in informal manufacturing (Gandhi, 2000). Women workers on the other hand reveal a bi-modality in the age profile and are found in large number in the age groups above 40 years (40%) and again in the age-group of 15-20 years (20%). Their relatively smaller proportion in the reproductive age-group of 30 to 40 (20%), emphasises the inequality in the division of labour associated with entry to work monitored by gender related interpretations of not only the reproduction responsibility but also the associated burden of child rearing and organising the household chores. Marriages at early age, high illiteracy rates and low education status of most of the women workers further increase their vulnerability to the exploitative mechanisms of the production system. Relatively higher literacy status among a section of women workers is explained by factors, such as, longer duration of stay in Mumbai or links of the male members in the family with factory industry as exemplified by the bidi workers having 70% of literacy against

Table 3: Typology of Informal Manufacturing and Product Specific Gender Dimension of Labour

Main Typological Group/ Product Type	Total Workers	No. of Female Workers		
		Frequency	% to Group Total	% to Total Female Respondents
A. Traditional	310	126	41	54.55
1. Pottery	50	4	8	1.72
2. Jari Works	75	5	6.66	2.13
3. Diamond cutting, Polishing and Jewellery Works	56	0	0	0.0
4. Bidi Rolling	67	67	100.00	29.0
5. Broom Making	44	44	100.00	19.1
6. Miscellaneous	18	6	33.31	2.6
B. Mixed	528	67	13	29.00
7. Leather and other Footwear	74	15	20.3	6.5
8. Leather Products other than Footwear	44	0	0	0
9. Garment Manufacturing	149	6	4.3	2.6
10. Textile Weaving and other Products	31	5	16.1	2.2
11. Paper Products	52	9	17.3	3.9
12. Paper, Printing and Book Binding	58	2	3.50	0.9
13. Food	70	30	43.0	12.90
C. Modern	402	38	9.0	16.45
14. Metal	164	16	9.80	6.90
15. Plastic	187	20	10.7	8.7
16. Rubber	15	-	-	-
17. Chemicals	20	2	10.0	0.85
Total	**1240**	**231**	**19.0**	**100.0**

30% in case of the broom-making women. Low socio-economic status and low levels of literacy in general in the source areas of the migrant women workers also provide an example explaining 80% to 100% of illiteracy in case of migrant women workers coming from Rajasthan, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh engaged in mixed type of activities as against low rates of illiteracy such as 20% to 30% amongst women workers from Kerala, Tamilnadu, coastal and western Maharashtra. Migration characteristics and duration of stay in the metropolitan economy also determine potentials of vertical mobility of women workers in the informal manufacturing sector. Thus, a small section of the non-migrants having long standing links with the formal sector have been found to compete better in securing wage-work or self-employment in mixed and modern type of informal manufacturing activities

Conclusion

Marginalisation of women in the economic sector needs to be understood with a historical perspective. Over a long period, women have been pushed out of mainstream economic activities, be it mining, production or trade for the purpose of ensuring a higher status for males. In all these activities, given the prevailing regional setting, women had once enjoyed comparable status with their male counterparts. The situation, however, has got especially complex in the last thirty years' with capital becoming more footloose and production segregated, leading to further informalisation of the economy. With jobs getting deskilled and ubiquitous, feminisation has intensified in the lowest rung. The study corroborates this trend by revealing that women workers have a marginalised status in the informal manufacturing in Mumbai too, comparable to that of the workers placed in the low paid formal industrial units. Product specific gender dimensions of division of labour continue amidst prevailing social taboos despite a metropolitan setting. Convenient adaptation of the strategy of feminisation is also facilitated either by mechanisation or exposure to export led growth by the capitalist forces. Patterns of work participation are oriented and adjusted to suit their gender specific roles prescribed by the society. The study also suggests that though proportion of women workers remains low in informal manufacturing in Mumbai, the genesis of the processes that led to acceleration of informalisation of the formal sector and increasing participation of women workers in the lower rung of the unorganised industrial sector (Banerjee, 1991) lay in the patterns and situations of earlier periods. Despite considerable changes in subsequent years, the peripheral status of women workers and their socio-economic mobility conditions have remained static.

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S. Gandhi
Department of Geography,
University of Mumbai
Mumbai

S. Banerjee-Guha
Centre for
Development Studies
Tata Institute of Social
Sciences