



Women Laborers, Trade Unionism and Globalisation: Prospects and Problems of Unorganised Sector in India

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Abstract

Most of the women in working are in unorganized sector. The unorganised sector consists of labour force of casual, household and self employed workers without adequate legal protection and support. But this sector offers wide employment opportunities to women, especially in the era of globalisation. The employees skilled with advanced technology and modern education have enough opportunities in this competitive milieu. But in reality most of the women working in this sector are poorly educated, from rural lower income families with lack of enough skills to meet the requirements of modern working environment. The involvement of trade union in this sector is also not up to the level of expectation. Redefinition of roles of trade unions are the necessity of the present-day world for protection and promotion of labour interest.

Key Words: Women Labourers, Trade Unions, Unorganised Sector, Globalisation,

Introduction

Women constitute nearly half of the total workforce of the world. They are working in both the organised and unorganised sectors. The employees of organised sector are under the protection of statutory rules and regulations in which their employments are secure and under protection compared to the employees of informal sector. They are controlled by established rules and regulations during their service period and even after retirement. On the other hand, the unorganised or informal sector consists of labour force of casual, household and self-employed workers. They are working under the employers or their agents, often without availing any job security coverages as per the laws. Their deployment, tenure, removal, service and other benefits are seldom covered by any statutory conditions (Tholkappian 2014: 295).

Eventhough, the male workers dominate female workers in number both in the organised and unorganised sectors, though the number of women workers in the lower strata of unorganised sector is relatively very high. Despite the fact that women constitute half of the world population, unfortunately the socio –economic status of the womenfolk of the world is no way satisfactory. In all walks of life, they face serious issues of gender inequality such as in the case of health, assets, education, opportunities, participation in the decision-making process and the like, where their role is subjected to various challenges.

Informal sector offers wide employment opportunities to both men and women. But the condition of labourers in the lower strata of unorganised sector is highly problem ridden. The women labourers of this class are the most vulnerable in this category. Most of the workers in the unorganised sector engage in occupation related to agriculture and such jobs are subjected to new challenges owing to mechanisation and rising dearth of traditional employment opportunities.

Economic disparity is the order of the present-day globalised world. After the advent of globalisation, world witnessed basic changes in economic relations. Below two per cent of the world's population owns about half of the world's wealth. The remaining population shares the other half. The workers of the world possess very little resources so as they earn only less than a dollar a day. The globalisation offers both chances and challenges to them. Workers, those who are in organised and unorganised sectors, seek new opportunities and resolutions in this situation.

Globalisation has changed the existing condition of work forces in organised and unorganised sectors. It resulted in a particular social condition characterised by close economic, political, cultural and environmental interactions and interferences and the boundaries and borders of nations became irrelevant (Steger 2013: 9). It is a particular kind of social process that changed the conventional economic, political and cultural relations globally. A uniform application is impossible under globalisation as it affects people in different ways who live in various parts of the globe. It accelerates social exchanges and economic activities within and beyond the boundaries of nation state (Steger 2013: 14).

Specialisation, competition, spreading of technical innovation, outsourcing and etc., have become acceptable in the globalised market leading to fundamental changes. Application and growth of cheap technology, inter-state movements of goods, services and man power, and communication also contributed to the changes in economic relations in society (Newland 999: 4).

Globalisation also brought fundamental changes in the employment and labour relations, both in developed and underdeveloped nations (Schurman and Eaton 2013). The specific effects of globalisation vary from country to country and region to region. It also varies from male to female workers and organised and unorganised sector workers.

Globalisation has produced clear winners and losers (Mills 2009: 2). Globalisation caused the expansion and integration of market based financial policies of the nations. It also resulted in the reduction of conventional nature of employment opportunities for male and female workers. Employment has become non-permanent, short term, contract based under the subordination of multiple employers, and away from the legally established economic and social welfare programmes. It has created large number of job opportunities in the secondary

sectors with informal and illegal nature of labour markets (Schurman and Eaton 2012: 5). It brought fundamental changes in the fields of science, technology and communication by providing unlimited chances to both employees and employers. The supporters of globalisation opined that many nations grow faster than their day and the life expectancy and standard of living also improved (Stiglitz 2002: 4).

As a result of globalisation, the arena of competition is between the unequal, that means, population with different capacity and calibre including education and resources that results merger and marginalisation of various firms which offer employment opportunities and marginalisation of the weak and the poor (Verma 2004: 4).

Specialisation and updation of knowledge are the key aspects of modern employment brought out by globalisation. The employees who are not able to update their skill and knowledge may be thrown out at any time and they are always under the threat of losing their job. The poor female labourers of unorganized sector are the real victims of these changes.

But globalisation brings movements of financial capital easier than earlier, and fast growth in technological field and communication. Globalisation provides equal opportunities to both the multinational companies and indigenous industries. Due to the higher mobility, major Corporations can purchase raw materials and labour globally and establish their production units where conditions are more favourable to them (Dahan et al. 2016: 38). The openness of markets and trade offered by globalisation provides wide opportunity for MNCs to gain bargaining advantage over both labourers and national labour rules. These conditions make the survival of the poor firms under peril. They have no such capacity to compete with the MNCs because of the low financial capital, weak technological support, lack of highly skilled employees and etc.

The employees skilled with advanced technology and modern education have enough opportunities in this competitive milieu. But those who have from the marginalised classes have found it difficult to survive. The condition of most of the women labourers are the same in this situation. They are always in the back stage of advanced education and opportunities. Very few of them are in touch with the latest technology. Globalisation provides little opportunities to the vulnerable class of women workers, especially those who are from the unorganised sector.

The unorganised sector deserves special significance under globalisation. The nature and character of this sector varies from country to country. But they share certain common features worldwide. According to the International Labour Conference (ILC), unorganised sector workers may be covered by statutory regulation, but they are either inadequate or difficult to implement. The workers of this sector are very rarely organised under trade unions. The national legal framework provides protective measures only in the organised sector. There are rules and regulation for the protection and welfare of this class of workers. But in actual practice, because of the labourers of this class very rarely get the benefits of the laws prescribed for them. In this situation, globalisation brings more challenges to those who are in the lower strata of the employment hierarchy of the unorganised sector and women labourers are the worst affected group due to their vulnerability.

Globalisation has generated economic development and at the same time, the economic disparity of the people is also widened. In such a state, workers belonging to both organised and unorganised sectors find the situation quite unfavourable.

Globalisation has resulted in the generation of a large number of job opportunities in various sectors. At the same time, increasing expenditure on health care, education, transport and break up of all supportive mechanisms are the side effects under the pressure of globalisation. The workers are under the threat of loss of job, reduction of wages, inability to raise their voice against injustices, and denial of basic rights like freedom of association and collective bargaining and industrial democracy.

It is essential to protect both labourers in organised and unorganised sector from various forms of exploitation. At the same time, it has the responsibility to maintain a good industrial relation for the prosperity of the nation and humanity. In this light, trade unions hold the challenge to organise the unorganised majority, especially the poor women of the unorganised sector.

Women Labourers in India

Workers constitute 39.79 per cent of the total population in India. Out of this 53.3 per cent are male workers and 25.51 per cent are female workers (Census Report 2011). Women workers constitute a major share of India's labour force and their participation is gradually increasing.

Women are still mostly employed in traditional and informal sector at a lower level. Over the last decades, huge flow of women workers into labour market is witnessed. Along with this flow, the question of gender equality is one of the issues before the labour movement. Female labourers are subjected to discrimination in many ways. This discrimination is explicit within the family, at the workplace, in society and in political participation. The condition of working women in unorganised sector is more discriminated than organised sector, because majority of them is from unskilled, uneducated and lower strata of society.

New economy increased vulnerability to workers in general and women in particular. Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) offered and opened up large number of job opportunities. But employment in these sectors is also restricted largely to the more affluent, English speaking and elite sections of urban India.

The impact of economic globalisation on Indian labour market deserves special attention. The last decades completely changed Indian economy. In industry, many job opportunities are replaced by jobs with no regulation, security and other benefits. Traditional employment is replaced by new forms of employment and most of this is in informal sector. Trade unions also witnessed meager bargaining power in these areas. Many women joined in the workforce and they contribute to family income but it has not resulted in the real improvement of the condition of women.

The labour market in India is also problematic. It is highly segmented along caste and gender lines. The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe category occupies lower strata jobs and are the most vulnerable class in the labour market in terms of earning and job security. Few women participate on the labour market and those who are rarely in formal waged employment.

An accepted view in our society is that it is not easy to organise women because they are apathetic and they are only concerned with their wages. Mainly trade unions are dominated by the male members and they pay very little attention to the needs of the female class of the society.

About Ninety Six per cent of women labourers in India are working in unorganised sector. They are outside meaningful regulation of employment. Agriculture, forestry, construction, quarrying, domestic work, home based industries, self-initiatives in which the largest number of women are employed are not covered under any legislation, except perhaps the minimum Wages Act.

Women labourers are under-represented in all walks of trade union leadership and decision making. This is not due to lack of any skill or ability, but because of the patriarchal character of society and attitude of fellow members. However, with the support of trade unionism, women labourers achieved a lot like Maternity Benefit Act 1961, legislation for provision of crèche facilities etc.

In organised sector, women labourers constitute a large share. Their role in trade union activities are mostly as passive members. A very little number actively involves in trade union activities.

Almost all trade unions at the national level have their units in the organised and unorganised sector. Trade Unions are always at the forefront to protect the interest of labourers at the time of crisis. But this is not the case at unorganised sector. Trade unions have very little bargaining capacity and they are not able to capture the confidence of the workers.

The contemporary labour movements are facing serious crises, which include declining militancy, falling union densities, shrinking wages and benefits, and declining overall working conditions.

The marked features of global economy after the advent of globalisation are increasing mobility of capital without borders, declining of the sovereignty of the nation states, weak bargaining power of the workers for labour welfare, introduction of advanced technology in working environment, and creation of vast number of part-time workers. The trade unions of present day should address these kinds of issues. It offers both chances and challenges before labour unions. Along with it, the trade unions should also give attention to the growing issues of women labourers from both organised and unorganised sectors.

The impact of globalisation and trade unionism over women labourers of both organised and unorganised sector has special significance. Earlier or before the adoption of New Economic Policy, the employees of organised sector were comparatively in a good condition and had more bargaining capacity than the labourers of unorganised sector. But the emergence of globalisation makes the condition completely changed. The condition of the labourers of unorganised sector has never been better. Their condition of wages, safety practices, working environment, security packages etc., are under peril. In this situation the comparative study of women labourers and trade unionism in the era of globalisation has special significance.

Various kinds of inequalities have grown along with the economic development under globalisation. The positive and negative impact of globalisation is affected all sections of working class. But the burden produced by globalisation affected highly on the shoulders of women labourers. They are increasingly pushed in to the labour market without adequate protective mechanisms.

The condition of women labourers in the organised sector are better compared to labourers of unorganised sector. However, the employees of organised sector are facing serious issues and challenges. Trade unions are regarded as the agency of protecting the labour rights though only a meagre section of the workers is unionised in our nation. The great majority is outside the purview of this coverage.

New labour reform policies are more lenient to the interest of employers than the labourers. This brings frustration among the employees. But trade unions could not tackle these issues effectively. Women labourers of both the sectors look towards trade unions for effective intervention. In this situation, trade unions have the wide scope to address the issues of labourers in general and women labours in particular.

Within the trade union front, women labourers are facing certain serious issues of under representation. Very few women are in the leadership level of the unions. Most of the women merely act as the passive members of the union.

Conclusion

Trade unions are active in organised sector of the selected firms and very meagre representation of trade unions are found in selected firms of unorganised sector. Women labourers of both these sectors have specific and unique problems to be solved. The impact of globalisation of these sectors deserves special significance. Within the midst of many protective rights and welfare schemes our labourers especially women are facing serious problems. But at the same time, globalisation offers new dimensions to the concept of gender equality, role of trade unions etc. In this situation, our system must ensure certain conditions to improve the quality of our women labourers to exploit the possibilities of the time.

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