



INFORMALITY OF WORK, POVERTY AND FEMINIZATION OF WORKFORCE: IMPLICATIONS OF NEOLIBERALISM

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ABSTRACT

Neo-liberalism sets an era where the restrictions towards paid employment for women have lessened with opening of new job opportunities. Yet, a large number of women are working in informal sectors have been fighting and struggling for better pay. According to recent statistics, bulk of female work-force in India is employed under highly informal condition with no written contracts, no provision for social security and legal protection for the employees. In the attempt to deliberate on different aspects of feminization of labour force in view of rising informalization of workforce, the article investigates the discourse on neoliberal trends and its succeeding policy packages in implicating change in the agency of women.

While reflecting on the cause of feminization of poverty based on the field observation of women in Sonitpur District of Assam, the article attempts to find out if informality of work could adequately serve in meeting diverse needs of woman.

KEYWORDS: *Neo-liberalism, Women employment, feminization of labourforce, Feminization of Poverty, Informal economy*

INTRODUCTION

The decade of 1980s is marked by labour de-regularization and a renewed surge of feminization of labour activity with growth of employment opportunities for women with growing numbers of low wage women workers (Standing, 1999). Feminization of labour force is treated as one of the implications of Neo-liberal policy that has arrived into the locus of discussion among academicians and development practitioners since early 21st century (Seth, 2001; McClean, 2000; McILwaine and Datta, 2003).

Structural adjustment and economic recession over the past two decades have resulted cutbacks in public sector and wage reduction that has further swelled the informal economy. Sluggish and unproductive formal sector has led to the growth of informal sector which is regulated by market demand and wages. Informal economy is no longer considered as a feudal remnant or a parasite that grows from the retarding advancement of the formal sector, as described by Hart during an ILO employment mission to Ghana and Kenya (Hart, 1973).

Features that define informal economy include labor-intensive work, use of skills acquired outside the formal seminary system, minimal capital investment and maximum use of family labor and so on. The umbrella concept 'informal economy' encompasses broad range of unregulated activities including self-employment, casual work and home-based production and so on. Often the term is conceived and taken into consideration for different interpretations such as 'black economy', 'shadow economy', 'hidden economy' and 'real economy' (Allen, 2003).

NEO-LIBERAL REFORMS AND TRENDS

Neoliberal paradigm, is strengthened by the "packages of reform" or "best practices" chosen by the IMF (International Monetary Fund), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization that is mellowed rapidly to most parts of the world in the form of political and economic policies (Martin, 2004). Vision of neoliberalism gained ground since 1970s in political economic practices. Since 1991, allegiance to IMF-WB



(International Monetary Fund-World Bank) orchestrated economic reforms including structural adjustment programme. That is succeeded by adoption of New Economic Policy by India in 1990 which further encouraged foreign direct investment, deregulation, watering-down of social, welfare, health, labour and environmental laws, and opening domestic markets to foreign competitors, simultaneously increasing corporate influence and involvement in governance. Countries that adopted neo liberal policy are susceptible to conditional ties of donor agencies while providing aids to the borrower country. Neo liberalism envisaged a roll back of state unlike classical liberalism while putting greater reliance on market friendly policies. In India, major initiatives were taken to reorient and restructure the public sector units (PSUs) and sporadic attempts have been made towards disinvestment in public sector enterprises in the midst of controversies. In India, a number of studies demonstrate how India has witnessed macro-economic political transformations in sectors like trade, construction, transport, financial services and information and communication technologies (Ghosh, 2005; Gupta, 2005). Further, neo-liberalism focuses on reinventing the government by transforming the role of public administration.

Neo-liberalism sets an era that lessens the restrictions towards paid employment for women with opening of new job opportunities for women in the growing service sector however, paid work opportunities for women have been highly uneven.

Two parallel trends hit the informal sectors together. Firstly, feminization of labour force, secondly, steep rise in informal sector workers with a predictably higher share of women inflow in unorganized sector. Unlike West, proletariat class labourforce is mostly feminized in India in the unorganized sectors, majority of them are younger female workers.

Some policymakers label informal economy as 'women sector' due to its capacity to accommodate majority of female workers. However, the factors such as lack of proper education, restricted entry of women into the formal sector, lowering demands of women labour in formal sector compel women to enter into informal economy have equal contribution to make it women specific sector. Labour force in India in agricultural and manufacturing sectors of the informal economy is highly feminized. Ghosh (2005) in his study stated that service industry in urban areas that was previously branded as organized sector economy has gradually been getting feminized and informalised. Large number of small, unregistered enterprises has commonly become a large source of employment for women.

PARADOXES IN WOMEN LABOUR PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

Although Government has claimed that participation of women in labour force has increased over the years, paradoxes are found in claims and actual trends of women in workforce. A notable paradoxes came to light in terms of the falling engagement of women in labour force, despite growth in economy, rising level of wages and income. In India, women participation in the labour force stands at around 26 percent, fall from 36.7 percent in 2005, a score that is much lower than any other country of G-20 [1] except for Saudi Arabia. There is a huge difference in employment pattern between men and women, the occupation, men and women choose to enter alongside their financial returns. Majority of women in workforce is consolidated in low paying dead end job.

Womenforce in agriculture have been increasing over the years, yet majority of women in farm lack control and ownership of land and productive resources which impede further to access to credit facilities and available subsidies. Increasing numbers of female workers in agriculture cant enjoy better access to market information nor could they exercise decision making role in their respective families which render them more vulnerable to economic vagaries.

With gradually sinking jobs in agriculture and increasing educational qualifications of women, made aspired younger women to prefer manufacturing and service sector than agricultural sector for immediate job opportunities. On the other hand, there is a rise in the share of women in non-farm sectors; the share of women in non-farm sector in wage reated job has increased from 18 percent during 2004-05 to 24 percent in 2015. Female participation in workforce varies across states in India. Participation is lower in those states where there is less initiative to sponsor wage labor for women with a weak tradition of female wage labor. The intervention schemes in rural India, i.e. National Employment Guarantee Scheme have increased the demand for wage labor among poorer households. This scheme, exceeding the minimum quota requirement has appealed many women to do job, registered a strong demand for work among women (Labour Bureau Report, 2012-13).

FALL IN HUMAN CAPITAL AND FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

A noticeably sharp difference is found in indicators of level of education between men and women. In the group of 'medium human development' countries, 67.3 percent of adult women are literate as against 83.3 percent of men. Whereas in the 'low



human development countries', 35.8 percent females are recorded as literate as against 57.2 percent males. Even the school enrollment percentages (combining all three levels) record 60 percent for females and 68 percent for males in medium development countries, whereas 33 percent for females and 44 percent for males in low human development countries during 2014 (UNDP Human Development Report, 2015).

Sectorial distribution of level of primary and secondary education of women in India reveals that 30 percent of rural women are educated till middle school and only 18 percent of the rural working women are educated up to primary level. 63 percent of the rural women with education till secondary level are still engaged in agricultural activities and 23 percent of graduate women are working in agriculture and allied field. 52 percent of the rural women who are engaged in educational sector have education up to higher secondary and above. On the other hand, 10 percent of rural women engaged in education sector are illiterate and 17 percent of them have education till middle school level. About 26 percent of women who are engaged in public administration, health and social work have education up to secondary level.

50 percent of the women engaged as domestic workers in urban areas are illiterate and 28 percent of women workers employed in private households as domestic staff are literate up to primary level. According to government statistics, 58 percent of rural women workers are illiterate while 28 percent of male workers are illiterate. 30 percent of urban women workers are illiterate as compared to 11 percent of men (India labour and employment report, 2014). With a low level of education, majority of women cannot enjoy the legal entitlements for better opportunity to move upward.

Even in the terrain of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), rural-urban disparity is accompanied by greater gender based disparity. Men women division in attainment of technical education e.g. engineering, medicine etc in urban areas is found to exist 2.9 percent of technically educated women as compared to 7 percent of men. In terms of vocational training, a sharp gender disparity appears with 3.6 percent of women in rural India as compared to 8 percent of men and 6.5 percent of women in urban India as compared to 14.4 percent of men. The benefit of vocational training in availing opportunities in the labour market is also not very promising (Kannan, 2011).

FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY: IMPLICATIONS IN FEMINIZATION OF LABOUR FORCE

Poverty is an inalienable cause to explain the massive women first informal sector. Majority of rural women are susceptible to disastrous impact of poverty that drives them to engage in unorganized economic activities e.g. domestic work, construction work, small trades like brick making, coir and basket weaving, other agricultural activities, dairy, fisheries etc. to eke out a living. Then, the question arises if informal sector is the ideal sector for poor women to survive? Why many women prefer to enter into informal economy? An apparent factor that determines women's engagement in this sector is the ability the sector that makes women easily switch in and mix reproductive and productive tasks. Women can prepare food for sale, simultaneously can feed their families.

Women's association to informal economy is driven by enabling the use of indigenous resources, ease of entry, small scale of operation of informal economy.

Poverty has been feminized, a trend that is characterized by low level of asset building by women. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen termed this trend, 'feminization of poverty', an extremely "troubling" societal tendency that can only lead to "capabilities failure" of women. For poor, labour is the primary asset at their disposal and labour markets are the crucial transmission apparatus that give them the exposure to translate labour into paid work. The wages, salaries and paid work are further translated into growth related benefits that are prerequisites for a decent standard of living, an improvement from impoverishment. The building blocks of gender empowerment and gender equality can not be sustained when there are increasing incidences of unemployment and an insatiable addiction to work only with the primary sectors.

In enmesh of poverty, housewives are found to fall into a complex set of deprivations: malnutrition and bad health, lack of access to the job market, low mobility, low level of trust, reciprocity and cooperation, low skills, incomplete education and so on. The poor are habitually being denounced and stigmatized as "lazy poor" who don't know how to grab the opportunities when offered and made accessible to them. Amartya Sen in his book "Well-being and Critical Voice" states, "Poverty of a life lies not merely in the impoverished state in which the person actually lives, but also in the lack of real opportunity given by social constraints as well as personal circumstances to choose other types of living." Lack of access to productive resources and credit, poor health care facilities, illiteracy and absence



of access to social services are found to be some major causes of poverty among rural women.

Gross and Miller, in their study attempts to explain poverty in terms of lack of income, both covert and manifest and lack of asset and availability of resources, e.g. educational, medical and recreational.

The commonality of poor rural women includes no claim or loss of entitlement to resources, capability deprivation, vulnerability to natural disasters, i.e. flood and financial inability to live everyday life. Poor housewives don't know and fail to learn the cause of their miserable conditions.

Apart from this, gaps in wages, prevalence of low-paid occupations in a lowly family support atmosphere for work, various challenges that women face in accessing public benefits are some factors that place women at high risk of poverty. Women who are into construction work carry bricks and water, do earth work on day to day basis are lowly paid. Contractual nature of construction work results insecurities among women and made them susceptible to the risk of loss of job. Women are conditioned to get low wages which is not as per the work hours they spend on field.

Pay inequality among women despite increasing number of women in work, has expediated occupational gender segregation. Even distribution of skills and training for women reinforces a gender stereotypical attitude. Women are mostly found to be engaged in hairdressing or tailoring while men are engaged in diverse forms of employments that include mechanics, carpenters, tailors, craft workers and metal workers and so on. Work such as painting, masonry, or other specialized trades are predominantly under men's domain and women are hardly encouraged to learn such skills. Such occupational segregation has created a division of wages among male and female when women are paid lesser than men. Women's access to employment is found only in the job of lower echelons of the hierarchy (Report on Adult literacy rate, UNESCO, Institute for statistics).

Women entertain fewer training opportunities than men. Male literacy rate was pegged at 82.14 percent compared to 65.46 percent female literacy rate in urban areas as per 2011 census.

Less income for women compared to men is symptomatic to educational deprivation, want of health care facilities. This has created a cycle of poverty among women and further incapacitated women. Female headed households, or single mother households are at the top risk or susceptible to poverty because they have fewer income earners to afford financial backing for their household. As per UN women report, 2019, India inhabites 12.5 percent single parents, 4.5 percent of all households are single mother

households with poverty rate of 38 percent among lone mother household.

Another statistics on growing numbers of single mother households across developing countries could also contribute to poverty in women due to their lack of access to critical resources for livelihood. It is also found that children of single mother households in rural areas are often deprived of availing the prospects to attain a decent life and meet the basic needs i.e. health and education. Another equally perilous trend in rural areas is emotional instability while parenting for which poverty and deprivation could be primarily blamed for. The burden of informal care work or child nurturing falls predominantly on women, which made them work longer and harder than men. Prevalent social bias is equally responsible for women facing trouble to obtain formal employment and less wages. This in turn deepens the cycle of poverty for women.

The society imposed ideas on family leads women to a biased and unfavorable condition where women perform crucial work, often, without pay and without due recognition. The sense and feel of failure is apparent in every other areas of her life including attaining citizenship of a country, enjoying employment benefits, practicing self-actualization through play and self-expression.

Neo liberal trends further accentuates stereotypical patriarchal beliefs that made women work harder, yet, consume and spend fewer resources on themselves, i.e. leisure time, holidays etc. Mere reflection of the gender disparity is seen even in exercising of equal autonomy by a woman in household as compared to her male counterpart. Bradley's (1999) work suggests that how working women face constraints in reconciling paid employment, family and reproductive work. Constraints related to the distance and proximity of the place of paid work to home (Gregson and Lowe, 1993) and of everyday coordination limit the available opportunities of women.

NEOLIBERALISM: SHUNNING OR SHINING TRANSFORMATIVE CAPACITY OF WOMEN

Economic implication of neo-liberalism is found in increased competition among rural families and households that further demands extra efficiency, more productivity, sustainable production systems and quality control. In a patriarchal arrangement, women are made to become 'efficient' neoliberal subjects that defy the traditional role of Indian women. The quality reform that coincided in educational expansion, training and extension services made rural women prepare for the "free" market. Liberalization claims to have



eliminated socio-cultural constraints to woman's work and productivity, dismantled legal barriers to woman's access to and control over resources such as inheritance of land, access to financial services and credit etc. Nevertheless, female educational attainment and participation of women in labor force have increased over the last three decades (OCED report, 2011).

Professionalism' has become one of the popular market trends promoted by Neoliberal policies, considering individual as an agent of development (Nightingale, 2005). Some parallel trends of neoliberal policies count improving literacy rate among women with increasing enrollment in education, feminization of labour force and women in paid work (Gupta, 2005; Raghuram, 2001). Neoliberalism (alongside globalization) has transformed the requisite set of skills for employment with centering focus on digital literacy, business and marketable skills, media and communication etc. (Ghosh,1996).

Critical dialogues on the perspective of neoliberalism in academic circles focus on the contradictory nature of neoliberal policies that could disrupt the development. Women are gradually excluded from fruitful productive job and pushed towards occupation in the fringe (Mathew, 1995). Although the rate of employability has been positively increased among women as a result of neoliberalism, certain sections of population especially the lower middle class women have been encumbered by the adverse consequences of neo liberalism.

The framework of neoliberalism assigns 'responsibilities' in a consumerist fashion to women by providing them the opportunities to mobilize themselves through collective struggle with a transformative agenda, saying that it is actually a condition to enjoy prerogatives and 'rights'. As per what David Harvey (2005) postulates, neoliberalism is a sum of propositions that consider the progress of human welfare through development of individual entrepreneurial skills. The association of women in informal economy can harness the transformative capacity of housewives of the rural dwelling households. A sweeping change in personal agency apparently found among women after they participated in village club, community groups or SHGs.

The strategies employed in microcredit programs is criticized for perpetuating unequal relations between lender and borrowers. The 'underlying gender ideology' embedded in the programs of state-sponsored Self Help Groups (SHGs) in the Indian context ensure compensation or repayment by only targeting women. A publication by Nirantar (2007) cited, "women can be located easily...they cannot run away, leaving their

homes; they can be persuaded to repay more easily as they feel shame more quickly and consider non-repayment a matter of family honour." Lamia Karim (2011) in her book explains how notions like 'shame and honour' are treated as 'collateral' in ensuring loan repayment in Grameen Bank schemes in Bangladesh. A flock of women suicide in Andhra Pradesh in the last decade are treated as the implication of microfinance. Arunachalam, (2011) in his book uncovered the process, further, see-through the amount of pressure by moneylender on women as debilitating results of microfinance model.

According to critics of neo-liberalism, in an arrangement to organize housewives and poor rural women through community organization, the confused ideas of 'co-management and co-responsibility', 'cost recovery', 'co-financing' could only shift the burden of responsibility onto poor women. Molyneux, (2012) is of the view that community participation and voluntary work make women directly subordinated to the disciplines of the market.

CONCLUSION

Sudha Deshpande (1993) argues on the same context, "Exploitation of women in the labour market is bad. Yet, women not to be exploited in the labour market will be worse." However, increasing employability of women is not consistent with the rights enjoyed by them. Deregulation of labour markets and fragmentation of production processes have generated demand for casual (less secured), low skilled, informal contracts which put further implication on the adverse circumstances for female labour with meager pay for huge labour (Kundu,1997; Chanda and Sahu, 2002). Although a large gender gap is found to exist in employment and earnings, women's participation in the labour market is required not only to attain economic independence but also owing to the fact that mother's participation in labor market could limit the outcome of relative child poverty rate by increasing total household income. Woman's access to market and earnings has far greater impact on the well-being of children.

Neo liberalism, instead, leads to gradual makeover of women with new liabilities, the roles that women play are not changing; rather the space they are living becomes chaotic with competing identities.

Without state intervention, unregulated market freedom harping on profit-at-any-cost principle could susceptible to nurture more inequality by serving the interest of the ultra-rich section. Poor woman as constructed to be 'rational economic agent' to exercise choices under the framework of neo-liberalism is dubious. Deprivation and destitution of woman usually



affect the rationale self of women. Poverty makes this starta of women too confused to perceive what constitute their wellbeing and development.

The state centric choice based intervention is one path the author would like to recommend in order to ensure equal distribution of wealth and income for women, educational opportunities, health care, employment opportunities, life expectancy, infant mortality, land rights and so on . For those women who prioritize information and education over other development needs, empowerment lies only in socialization, meeting the needs of the family and those who are in close knit. Women who prefer to be economically independent have to learn their rights in order to have a sense of equal worth and about the avenues opened to pursue their goal. The practical approach to look into the problem for an explanation can be found in identifying the actual needs of the needy through gathering of facts and analyzing the problem in informal sectors. Ideal solution rests in creating a conducive environment for women with strategic planning that involves community voluteers with an aim to develop certain need based strategies and making women both consumer recipient and producer of services.

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Footnotes:

[1]G 20: is group of major economies of developing nations emerges at the 5th ministerial WTO conference, held in Mexico in August 2003. The original group of signatories went through changes and took different names as G 21, G 22 or G 23.