

Changing Status of Women in the Handicraft Industry

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Abstract: *This paper visualizes the changing status of women across several decades to present scenario; in the handicraft industry; the second most important contributor to our informal sector; next to agriculture. The condition of the rural artisans in general and female workers in particular is critical and they have been mere spectators of the developmental process. Although the products they make have established their place in the global market, but unfortunately their efforts are not globally recognized. The available literature studies from secondary sources have been thoroughly reviewed and thought upon. The emergence of Skill India Campaign and the change skill development sector has undergone over the years forecasts for them a world where they can acquire skill and generate capacity not only to work but maintain command of their family simultaneously. From being the skill propagators today's women are gaining the position of job creators and job providers; carving a niche for themselves through sustained efforts.*

Keywords: informal sector, skills, women workers

1. Introduction

Workers are assumed to be autonomous, self actualized who respond favorably to economic incentives. In an economy like India where mushrooming population of women workers came to the rescue of significantly expanding informal sector proving to be the powerhouse of vast untapped potential these women harbor; not just in the form of possession of variety of raw skills but the continuous progressive change they are incorporating into their lives ; acquiring employment skills, technical training and practical expertise which is no less than a phoenix for our agro-based economy on the start of experiencing a major demographic dividend.

The present paper probes on the changing status of women in the informal sector specifically referring to handicraft industry. The information available from existing literature studies like books, encyclopedias, journals, newspapers, digital libraries, published papers, conference proceedings, government reports etc were reviewed upon to develop the understanding about women in the informal sector in general and handicraft industry in particular; and the emerging changes it projects.

2. Women and Informal Sector

- Committee on status of women (1974: 157), stated women working in all the occupations having unorganized nature, come in this sector. The workers in this sector are outside the reach of most laws that seek to protect the security and working conditions of labor. Labor organizations are mostly absent, where they do exist, they are still in a formative stage and have had little impact on women (Mishra, 94).
- Committee on status of women (2019: 63), stated women empowerment as its theme for this year with focused emphasis on social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for promoting gender equality (research.un.org/en/CSW63; 14.9.2019)

- In a statistical study held in 1979 for Mexico, it was observed that almost throughout all informal economic sectors, the proportion of women was double that of men. With the progress of a developing country, significant expansion of informal employment takes place. Women are preferred to men in this sector, because, they willingly accept lower wages and unauthorized deductions, false accounts, delayed payments, etc.
- Considering the large proportion of women engaged in informal sector, it is essential that their real contribution to work force and national income be properly estimated.. (Rede. L.A., p.36-37) *In the unorganized sector since none of the protective labor laws such as, maternity benefit act (1961), Employees State Insurance Act (1948), Factory act (1948), Equal Remuneration Act are applicable; women and girls are mercilessly exploited. Virtually the law of the jungle prevails. Women workers do not get equal remuneration for their back breaking work. The minimum wages act is mercilessly flouted, there is no social security or worker's education programme. This section of the working class is deprived of land and water resources, easy access to raw materials, market credit, licensing, identity cards, safe transport, housing, crèche, ration cards, better tools, health and safety provisions. They have to work for very long hours and many times are sexually harassed by their employers and agents. There is a low productivity in this sector and there are few labor or trade union organizations to facilitate the mobilization of women workers and knit them into a conscious work force. (Mishra, 1998)

3. Women in handicrafts

- Pradeep Kumar Jena (as stated in Orissa review, November 2008, p.21, 23) Based on the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) survey of 1995-96, of the total workforce engaged in handicraft.; its, 47.42% are women of which 37.11% are coming under the backward communities like SCs and STs. Indian handicrafts sector forms the second largest employment sector -second only to agriculture. The state of condition

of the rural artisans is critical and they have been mere spectators of the developmental process. Although the products they make are becoming global, the grave question raised is how global really these artists are.

- According to NCAER survey, as stated in Sixteenth Indian Policy Forum (8-10 July 2019) on Indian National Education Policy (N-LERO), India will be producing one million job seekers every month for next twenty years. In order to balance both supply and demand of skills India urgently needs to meet its 3E-Education, Employability and Employment to reap the benefits of major demographic dividend (ncaer.org; 14.9.2019)
- Sanghamitra Jena and Nupur Patnaik (as stated in Orissa review, August 2019) Along the arc of Social Movements and Social Change in India to ensure safety of women Nirbhaya Movement was started in 2012 (odisha.gov.in; 13.9.2019)
- A study by Soma Basu suggests that the weavers of Pattamadaai mats of Tamil Nadu in general and women artists in particular are increasingly shifting to the profession like Beedi rolling, which is faster and easier and which earns higher returns.

4. The Informal Sector

- There are certain activities which are remunerated, but there is no statistical information available on them. The non registration of this type of paid work leads to absence of appropriate and systematic data collection regarding the income and labor force participation by workers engaged in this sector, especially the women. There are several studies which provide enough data and evidence on the significance of this sector. Considering the underground character of informal sector, its unstable, precarious and unregulated nature, the UN has prepared general, conceptual and methodological guidelines for the measurement of women's work in this sector (in industry, trade, services) carrying out a number of useful pilot studies in various developing countries. Depending upon the availability of data, micro economic survey data have been combined with macro economic data. (Rede. L.A., p.36)
- Nunez (1993), explained the concept of informal sector. It was first used in research study undertaken by International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1969 and has been liable to theoretical debate since then. The ILO and other studies adopted structural model i.e., a model in which development process causes structural changes, explaining the origin of the informal sector as a result of the development process. It is argued that due to non-absorption of surplus labor into formal modern sector, informal sector is generated.
- The informal sector is associated with labor intensive, small scale enterprise, and low paid, low skilled casual workers having few career prospects and include employers, employees workers of micro enterprises (defined as those with 5 or less workers by ILO), the self-employed (excluding professional and technical personnel) domestic servants and non-remunerated family workers. This sector involves diverse and heterogeneous activities, has unorganized labor, is traditional, unregistered or illegal, lacks barriers to entry, and is

typically made up of female and poor women, provides shelter to the unemployed, and in general the less privileged in the society, especially women, migrants and people having no chance of job in formal sector.

- ILO recently completed hundred years of its existence (1919-2019). It aims to achieve economic, social and environmental consistency and has a 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Decent Work. Job creation still remains to be the heart of economic policy making since over 60% workers lack job contract, only 45% are full time workers. In the absence of registered data it is difficult to visualize the complete picture of changes in the unemployment rate in last 100 years. By now, 2019 more than 212 million people will be out of work. The matter of greater concern is the significant downfall in the percentage employment growth from 0.9% average annually (2000-2007) to 0.1% (since 2008) (ilo.org; 13.9.2019)

5. The Visible Invisibility

- Bhattacharya B. et al (1993, as cited in Rede. L. A., p.28), According to official Indian statistics (NSS, 1981) women continue to lag behind men in all spheres of life-social, political and especially economic. Women's participation rate on crude workers (main) was 12.13% in 1971, 14.07% in 1981 and 16.03% in 1991.
- The revised NSS manual (2006) emphasized on gender justice through uptake of rural projects imparting traditional training of core skills like sewing, knitting and embroidery on one hand and instilling confidence in them for their inclination towards non; traditional vocations like electrical training or hospitality industry to enable them realize that no. vacation is closed for them (nss.gov.in/sites/default/files/manualNSS2006.pdf; 14.9.19)
- Growing feminist literature however, argues that these figures do not reflect the full extent of Indian women's involvement in productive activities both within their household and outside in the wider economy. This is so because; women contribute a lot in four important areas of work, namely, subsistence production, informal sector, domestic production and related tasks and volunteer work. Though women's contribution and weightage in these areas have been widely accepted, the current statistics available in India do not reflect women's share fully (Rede.L.A., p.29)

6. The Social Construct

- G. Venkateswarlu (as cited in Chakrapani and Kumar, 94, p.279), Women who constitutes nearly 50 percent of the population are the most harassed lot of the society. This is due to illiteracy, general poverty, social customs and the family taboos that prevail in the localities. Added to this, male members domination in the family has further subjugated women in the family. As a result women are deprived of their legitimate rights, subjected to malnutrition and ill-treatment and are even thrust with the responsibilities of looking after the other family members.

- Women receive only a small share of developmental opportunities. They are often excluded from education or from the better jobs, from political system, from adequate health care. In the countries for which relevant data are available, the female human development index is only 60 percent that of males (Human Development Report 1993, UNDP).
- On a contrasting scene the theme suggested for 2018 was Sustainable Economic Development. According to UNDP Report on Human Development Index (HDI) India ranks 130 with HDI of 0.640 as against 0.728 World HDI, with 18.5% skilled labour force and GDI of 0.841 against 0.941 for world (hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/IND)
- One of the major reasons for women's work becoming increasingly limited to the unorganized sector is that women lack the opportunity to acquire skills and training for marketing which could facilitate occupational shifts. This is related to the prevailing social relations between men and women as well as the structure of the economy. Since women have to bear the major burden of domestic chores which in a poor household is time consuming and labor intensive they do not have time and opportunity to acquire skills and training for better jobs, which ultimately results in unequal access to technology. (Mishra, 94)

7. Women and literacy

G. Venkateswarlu (as cited in Chakrapani and Kumar, 94, p.279), It is felt that best way of helping the women to attain economic independence is to make her literate. Education will make her aware of her status in the society and to help understand the level of exploitation she is facing. Literacy will also help her understand and appreciate the efforts of the government in making them aware of the nutrition, mother and child care, family and child welfare, etc. Whereby she can help herself and her family. Under socio-economic programmes women members are encouraged to take benefit of the various training programmes designed to give them economic independence and also generate capacity to command the family. Many women have started their own petty enterprises as a result of the training and have set an example for others to emulate.

8. Women Welfare Schemes

- Government has started several Women Welfare Schemes for financially assisting and benefitting women in haste of empowering them economically. Some of these schemes are: *Grant-in-Aid Scheme for Financial Assistance to Organizations* (voluntary and non-government) for taking-up action programmes/ projects for the benefit of women labor. This scheme avail assistance from international organizations like ILO, UNICEF etc. It provides financial assistance for organizing working women, educating them about their rights and duties, giving them legal aids, arranging seminars and workshops aiming at raising general consciousness of the society about the problems of women labor. Another scheme is; *Trade Related Entrepreneurship Assistance and Development (TREAD) Scheme for Women*. This scheme envisages economic empowerment of women through trade related training,

information and counseling extension activities related to trades, products services etc. It benefits women, who have no easy access to credit from banks due to cumbersome procedure and the inability of poor and illiterate woman to provide adequate security demanded by banks in the form of collaterals. Credit is made available to applicant through NGOs who also provide them adequate counseling, training and assistance in developing markets. (Women Welfare Schemes pg.90, 91, 96)

- According to reports from Union Budget (2019-20), to promote Women Entrepreneurship, a scheme named *Naritu Narayani* was initiated emphasizing creation of women SHGs and disbursing amount of Rs.5000 to every SHG member promoting self-employment.
- Another initiative was grant of Rs. One lakh as loan for start-up ventures under *Pradhan Mantri Mudra Scheme*. (pml.in/central-government-scheme/nari-tu-narayani-yojana/)

9. Support from Voluntary Agencies

- Dr. D. Paul Chowdhury (as stated in Social Welfare, Vol.4, Oct 1997, pg.5), Thus for the first time the Central Social Welfare Board motivated, guided and supported women's voluntary agencies in supplementing income of poor women in rural and urban areas through training, production and funding of what was then called socio-economic projects. Match factories were set up in Vijaywada, ancillary units were linked up with industries. Projects of handloom crafts, coir goods etc. were also funded, but it could hardly help women in competing with the market. The main problems have been connected with purchase of raw materials, economics of production and marketing. Therefore there was a need of development approach to income generation and employment. (International Journal of Social Welfare; vol28, issue 4) ([online library.wiley.com/journal/14682397/current](http://online.library.wiley.com/journal/14682397/current))
- Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA): A large number of NGOs have taken up programmes for employment and income generation through innovative projects. One such effort is that of Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Ahmedabad. SEWA started its work by helping self employed women to become self-sustaining to increase their earning. The beneficiaries of SEWA include women vendors, home-based women producers, women laborers etc. It has also helped women workers in new trade, aggressive marketing and establishment of a co-operative bank in 1974 to help members save and secure loans for their business. Smt. Ela Bhatt initiated this project which was later on replicated elsewhere. Thousands of women were benefitted by this programme. In 2006 leadership was the target of this association (www.sewa.org, 15.9.19)

10. Feminism: Breaking the barrier

- Equal Pay and Civil Rights Act (1968) is viewed as marking the beginning of the present wave of feminism, banning discrimination against women in the labor market. One of the main goal of this act has been the

achievement of economic equality for women. If women are to achieve equality with men they must either do the same type of work men do or the earnings in women's jobs must be comparable to those in men's jobs. But labor force participation is intertwined with roles of both males and females in the household. As long as women have household responsibilities and men only help out, employed women will spend more time in home making and consequently will be at disadvantage in moving up in labor market jobs (Blay and Ferber as cited in Larwood, Stromberg, Gutek 88).

- Direct observations of some other data also confirm the intensity of gender inequality in vitally important fields. An observation of inequality can yield a diagnosis of injustice only through some theory (or theories) of justice. Another notion is the tolerance of gender inequality as legitimate and correct (e.g. providing more health care and nutritional attention to boys) in families. The perceived justness of such inequalities and absence of any contrary sense of deep injustice play a major part in the operation and survival of these arrangements. It is therefore important to scrutinize the underlying concepts of justice and injustice, and to seek a confrontation between theory and practice (Sen, 89).
- Feminist theory focuses on the concept of womanhood, has a normative quality-that is, it is concerned with what ought and what ought not to exist in political and social life of women. Encyclopedia of feminism (1987, as stated in Beasley, 99, p.27) dictionaries usually define it as the advocacy of human rights based on a belief in the equality of the sexes, and in its broadest sense, the word refers to everyone who is aware of and seeking to end women's subordination in any way and for any reason...feminism originates in the perception that there is something wrong with society's treatment of women. (Beasley, 99)

11. Significance of the study

This paper gradually captures the displacement of the sorrowful state of women workers with a new dawn where they are grabbing the attention of different external agencies to support their cause, to grant them resources, to fund their projects but the real challenge still lies unattended. Women can make their mark by becoming an estate agent for designing and crafting articles but it requires technical skill and practical experience which are unavailable to the female labor force in the unorganized sector. Despite of several measures their strength lies vague, their potential remains unutilized. This calls for deeper attention from policy makers. Guidelines need to be rephrased to harness the unattended potential of women. This is possible through sensitization programmes towards gender neutrality, framing of formal school curriculum in a manner giving due consideration to addition of courses on value education and vocational training to restore the seemingly depleting human values, dignity of sexes, importance of hand skills etc. and ensure these qualities to be re-inculcated equally in males and females for harmonizing marital relationships, societal construct and sustain economy.

12. Conclusion

It is important to note that whatever research has been done on informal sector, the focus is on the craft and the large turnovers it fetches which is flourishing the trade and the enterprise owners. No published data so far is available on the contribution of women workers in this sector, also there are no significant researches done to demask the status of women workers engaged in this work. This paper attempts to map the changes women experienced over two decades and position they occupy lately. The studies reviewed proves that women today are not only carriers and propagators of this craft but also creators and providers of jobs in the handicraft sector which provides a further scope for the study.

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