



## Issues relating to women employment and empowerment in India

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**Abstract:** Labor laws have been reformed along with trade and investment reforms in our country. Earlier days Labor Laws were enacted to protect the interests of the workers. Though, most often these laws confined to paper, they were at least implemented in public sector organizations and government departments. They provided leverage for women workers to seek social protection and thereby to express their voice. After liberalization of labor laws, casual and contract workers replaced regular workers, working hours are increased, unionization is not allowed, labor department officials are not allowed to inspect working and wage conditions prevailing at the work site, this is particularly true in case of SEZs, where large numbers of women workers are employed. Besides, women workers too frequently face sexual harassment at work place.

**Key words:** Women, Employment, Empowerment, Structures, constraints

Economic empowerment refers to access to or command over resources by households and individuals, which enhance their capabilities. At the most elemental level, the status of employment of household's members and ownership of assets determine a household's income, which to a very large extent determines the individual's command over resources. Hence, employment has featured as an important item in the development agenda in India. However, approaches to employment have varied in different periods during the last over 50 years.

In the initial years of development planning care was taken to see that employment of a reasonable magnitude is generated in the development process to productively employ the growing labour force. A reasonably high rate of economic growth combined with an emphasis on labour intensive sectors like the small scale

industry was envisaged to achieve this goal. (T.S.Papola).While granting that in 'an economy with relative abundance of labour, a bias in favour of comparatively labour intensive techniques is both natural and desirable', it was clearly recognized that 'considerations of size and technology should not be set aside to emphasize employment'.( Planning Commission,1956,pp.112-113)

The Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-79) sought to address the employment issue by reorienting the pattern of growth in favour of employment intensive sectors. At the same time, a strong opinion was emerging to suggest that growth alone cannot solve the problems of poverty and unemployment, and therefore, a number of special employment and poverty alleviation programmes were launched. They were mostly of two kinds: providing financial and other assistance for



productive self-employment, and offering supplementary wage employment to the underemployed. Over the years, these programmes have been continued in one form or other, have been modified or integrated, new ones have been started while some old ones have been discontinued. The latest in the series is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme annually to every rural household, under an Act of Parliament. The Government of India, keeping in view the social and structural constraints faced by women; has undertaken several initiatives to provide support to working women.

The constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. The empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women. The National Commission for women was set up by an Act of parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments (1993) to the constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels.

India has also ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights of women. Key among them is the ratification of the Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination as well as the Platform for Action (1995) and the Outcome

Document adopted by the UNGA session on Gender Equality and Development & Peace for 21<sup>st</sup> century, Titled "Further actions and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action" have been unreservedly endorsed by India for appropriate follow up.

The present paper will discuss the linkage between women's employment and empowerment under the condition of liberalization of trade and investment. The paper depends on secondary data drawn from various reports and research articles for discussion. Primary information is used to supplant the situations wherever necessary. The framework presented involves three issues. First, the paper analyses women's employment position in our country. Second, it will address the gender gaps in employment by relating to what Nancy Folbre (1994) terms "the structures of constraint": norms and preferences that shape individual choice. Third, it also looks into how liberalization of trade and investment influence the women's empowerment.

### **Women in Employment:**

The present section analyses the women's participation in the labor force, work participation rate and their participation in wage employment. It also looks at the sectors of women's concentration in the work. Female participation rates are much lower than male participation rates in the labor force in our country. This is true for both urban and rural areas presented in Table.1.



**Table.1**

**Labor Force Participation Rate by Usual Principal and Subsidiary Status, 1993-94 and 2009-10.**

Sector	Males		Females		Persons	
	1993-94	2009-10	1993-94	2009-10	1993-94	2009-10
Rural	87.6	82.5	49.0	37.8	68.6	60.4
Urban	80.1	76.2	23.8	19.4	53.3	48.8

Source: NSS, Report NOS409 and 515.

Note: For population aged 15 years and above.

From the Table we can understand that female labor supply to the labor market is not as automatic as male labor supply to the labor market.

Work participation rate by sex for the years 1991 and 2001 is presented in the Table.2. The percentage of male main workers is higher than the percentage of

female main workers for both years 1991 and 2001. The percentage of male main workers is 50.9 and 45.5 respectively for the years 1991 and 2001, whereas, the percentage of female main workers is 15.9 and 14.68 respectively for the years 1991 and 2001. The related data is presented in the following Table 2.

**Table.2**

**Work Participation Rate, Main and Marginal Workers by Sex  
 (Percentage), 1991 and 2001**

Category	1991		2001	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Main workers	15.9	50.9	14.68	45.5
Marginal workers	6.3	0.6	10.99	6.59
Non-workers	77.7	48.4	74.32	48.07

Source: India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of Women and Child Development (2004), Government of India, ii & iii rd periodic Report on the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women. (EADAW Periodic Report, New Delhi, p.102)

The percentage of female workers is higher than male workers in both the marginal and non-workers categories. The female marginal workers percentage is 6.3 in 1991 whereas the male marginal workers percentage for the same year is 0.6. Similarly, female marginal workers percentage is 10.99 in 2001. Male

marginal workers percentage in 2001 is 6.59. The percentage of female non-workers is respectively 77.7 and 74.32 for the years 1991 and 2001. The percentage of male non-workers for the years 1991 and 2001 is respectively 48.07 and 48.07.



**Table.3**

**Work Participation Rates by Sex and Residence (Percentage) 1981 to2001.**

S.no	Census	T/R/U	Female	Male	Persons
1	1981	T	19.7	52.6	36.7
		R	23.1	53.8	38.8
		U	8.3	49.1	30.0
2	1991	T	22.3	51.6	37.5
		R	26.8	52.6	40.1
		U	9.2	48.9	30.2
3	2001	T	25.7	51.9	39.3
		R	31.0	52.4	42.0
		U	11.6	50.9	32.2

Source: India, Planning Commission (2003). Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-2007), Volume ii, New Delhi, p.23.

From the above Table it makes us understand that women's participation in work is more casual in nature than men. Work Participation Rate also indicates that male participation rates are much higher than female participation rates both in rural and urban areas in three census years under consideration. The work participation rates for males in 1981, 1991 and 2001 are respectively 52.6, 51.6 and 51.9. The female work participation rates in 1981, 1991 and 2001 are respectively 19.7, 22.3 and 25.7. Female work participation rates for the three census years under consideration

are higher in rural areas than in urban areas.

Women's employment in public sector is lower than their participation in private sector. 16.5 per cent of the total persons employed in public sector are women employees. 24.05 per cent of the persons employed in private sector are women. Women's participation in organized sector is lower than men's participation in the organized sector. This may be because of low levels of literacy among women.

**Table.4**

**Women's Employment in Organized Sector (Public and Private) as on 31.3.2006.**

S.no	Sector	Employment(in Thousands) As on 31 <sup>st</sup> March		Women to Total persons employed(percentage) 2006
		2005	2006	
1	Public	2920.98	3002.82	16.5
2	Private	2095.25	2117.69	24.05
	Total	5016.22	5120.51	19.0

Source: India, Ministry of Labor, Directorate General Employment and Training (2008). Employment Review 2004-2006, New Delhi, p.65.



Women's share in wage employment in non-agricultural sector in rural and urban areas taken together is only 19.11 per cent. Women's wage employment in rural areas is higher than in urban areas. It is 20.13 per cent for rural areas and 17.98 per cent for urban areas.

**Table.5**

S.no	Residence	Women in wage employment in Non-agricultural Sector(percentage)
1	Rural	20.13
2	Urban	17.98
3	Rural+ Urban	19.11

Source: India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Central Statistical Organisation (2006)

Thus, women's participation in work is not as automatic as it is for men. Women's participation is governed by the socio economic institutions wherein they live.

#### **Household Approach to Women's Employment and Empowerment:**

The relationship between employment and empowerment is determined by gender. The analysis on gender and labor supply, which is determined by the employment decisions of men and women, focuses on gender specific differences in human capital. However, gender-based differences in education, skills and experience are themselves rooted in the institutional, social and material contexts in which they live in.

The preferences, norms, assets and rules that shape individual choice differ for men and women. Their preferences are influenced by their own self-perception, what they value, and what choices they perceive as possible, which are constituted by the social world (Sen, 1990). A survey on "Aspirations of girl students' in the college where I work at present revealed that 30 percent girls

aspire to do P.G.courses in the subject of their choice, 50 per cent aspire to do B.Ed. and 20 per cent girls aspire to work. However, the pursuance of the goals by these girls is subjected to their parent's willingness and affordability, on concurrence of in-laws and husband to be. Another girl student, who recently passed out and got married, stated that though she aspires to do work, her husband asked her to wait for couple of years to seek employment. The girl students perceived themselves in and valued the stereotyped roles. It is placing limitation on building their capabilities, advancing their careers and entering into the labor market at an early age so as to gain experience and skills.

Norms are the traditional structures of gender and kinship that constitute the meaning and social expectations of women and men in the household. They particularly change throughout the course of a women's or households life cycle. The most important is the sexual division of labor. Women are primarily associated with the care and reproduction of the family, and much of their work time is spent outside of the market, whereas the men's work is



typically viewed as more directly productive and more fully incorporated into the market sphere. These divisions not only determine women's labor force participation but also the type of occupations they opt for. It also determines women's position in the household and in the society. Because of these prevalent norms in the society women work participation rates are higher for the marginal workers than for the main workers. Women's participation is concentrated in low skilled and low wage employment.

Norms about divorce and remarriage also underpin household-level structures that shape women's labor. They partly determine the possibility and terms of exit from nuptial union and affect women's attitude towards labor market. In India where divorce rate is relatively low compared to other parts of the world, wage work for women is less important as insurance against the economic stress of divorce. This may be the cause for the low participation of women as main workers. In parts of Southeast Asia, divorce and remarriage rates are high (Lim, 1990:106), women's labor force participation rates and active household management provide a way of insuring against the costs of divorce .

Household assets or wealth structure women's labor supply in two distinctive ways: 1. The combined assets of all household members determine how much wage employment the household requires to meet its consumption needs; and 2. A women's own assets help to determine the extent to which she controls her own labor supply.

In our country, most often, women spend the early years of married life in nuptial house along with in -laws,

where the demand for wage employment to meet the household consumption requirements are relatively less and hence low participation in the labor market as main workers. The reproductive activities of women in the household also demand large part of her time and thereby limit women's participation in the labor market. Women are pushed to the labor market at a later age as casual workers to supplant the husband's income either because their own family has grown or they separated from the nuptial house.

#### **Bargaining capacity of women within the Household:**

Individuals live in households where one's input into resource allocation and distribution decisions depends both on ones right or ability to try and influence household decisions(voice), including decisions about one's own strategic life choices.

Individuals, both men and women begin with a set of constraints, priorities and needs. Constraints refer to resources, priorities and needs correspond to person's desires and responsibilities relative to household production. Priorities and needs tend to be gender specific, in that there is likely to be gender-based division of financial or household responsibilities. Hence, they are strongly determined by factors such as norms or stage in the life cycle. The set of individual constraints and priorities/needs combine to form an individual's "provisioning capacity". The provisioning capacity to fulfill their own wants and needs and the responsibilities they have to others.

It is assumed that the households produce in a context of cooperation and conflict. They combine



their capacities to provision in ways that reflect their common and differing priorities. Provisioning capacity and terms of exit are central to intra-household bargaining power. Exit refers to the one's fallback options. The greater one's priorities or needs, relative to one's constraints, or the less the attractive one's options outside of household cooperation, the less bargaining power one will have.

Parents opt to give in marriage to their daughters at an early age owing to the norms in the society. They consider spending on higher education of girls as additional burden because they have to spend on dowry while giving in marriage to their daughters. Again, according to the prevalent norms in the society; even though girls secure employment, parents cannot depend on their earnings. The provisioning capacity of the girls to their conjugal household is considered as low. Options to the girls to move out of the household before marriage are very few. Hence, girls in the household have weak bargaining capacity and their aspirations to seek employment or proceed for higher education are constrained.

Wage income enabling women to fulfill their needs empowers them at the household level in the short-run. However, to what extent women can utilize wage income as bargaining tool to express their voice and thereby empower themselves in the long-run depends on the nature of employment, income from the employment, availability of social security and child care services and also prevailing norms in the society. All these aspects operate at the macro level. So, the empowerment of women at the household level is conditioned by the factors operating at the macro level.

For instance, women are participating in large numbers as marginal workers and self-employed workers. These employments neither challenge traditional gender relations in the household nor provide social security, child care or equal wages. It implies women for their survival needs continue to depend on other household members; usually male members in the household. Under the circumstances they have few options to move out of the household. Thus, these women are not really empowered.

Welfare schemes implemented by the state government like Fees reimbursement, Scholarships and 33 percent reservation for women, and provision of loans to self-help groups at low rate of interest helped some women to pursue higher education, secure employment in Government Departments and to start their own trade, which in turn shore up their intra-household bargaining power and thereby empowered them in the short-run. They in the long run shape women's ability to bargain by influencing voice, preferences and norms. However, these schemes are exogenous to the household and their continuation by the government depends on the availability of resources with it and the policies it going to adopt in the future.

#### **Liberalization and women's empowerment:**

Liberalization of trade and investment affect women's empowerment through wage / employment effect and social protection effect. We assume that liberalization policies lessen the gender inequalities by increasing employment opportunities for women.



Women's earnings or wage employment bears a direct positive impact on women's empowerment. Globalization underlies the nearly universal increase in women's share of non-agricultural labor force among high growth developing countries in the past few decades, a result of the tremendous growth in manufacturing trade and export processing from developing countries. The associated increase in demand for women's labor is not just a matter of expanding the available labor force when men labor is in short supply. Women are employed as their wages are low compared to men's wages and because employers perceive women are more productive in these types of jobs. Women are employed in labor intensive segments of manufacturing or by labor intensive export firms to reduce cost of production, which is essential for international competitiveness. By extension, women may lose their comparative advantage in these job markets as industries upgrade, leading to defeminisation of manufacturing employment as has happened in Mexico, India, Ireland and Singapore. Women working in the informal sector are seldom counted in official employment statistics.

Trade and investment liberalization resulted in two opposing tendencies operating within the economy. On the one hand, there is pressure to cut supply of social protections by reducing the role of government and firms in their provision. Trade and investment liberalization enhance exit options available to firms because it is easier for them to move abroad in search of lower productive costs, and increase the international competition facing domestic firms from transnational corporations. As such, liberalization contributes to

suppressing the ability and willingness of firms, even if they do not finance the protections themselves.

Trade investment liberalization increased demand for social protections. Globalization created both winners and losers. The losers demand for social protection so as not to be excluded further with the accelerated pace of change. Globalization resulted in monetization of the economy. Expanding marketisation and commodification of different aspects of local economies added to women's double burden. They are forced to take up job to meet the needs of the families. Furthermore, to pursue new opportunities offered by liberalization, children must be educated and in good health. All these factors combine to increase the support that women need from the community and state to carry out their provisioning responsibilities.

Labor laws have been reformed along with trade and investment reforms in our country. Earlier days Labor Laws were enacted to protect the interests of the workers. Though, most often these laws confined to paper, they were at least implemented in public sector organizations and government departments. They provided leverage for women workers to seek social protection and thereby to express their voice. After liberalization of labor laws, casual and contract workers replaced regular workers, working hours are increased, unionization is not allowed, labor department officials are not allowed to inspect working and wage conditions prevailing at the work site, this is particularly true in case of SEZs, where large numbers of women workers are employed. Besides, women workers too frequently face sexual harassment at work place.





These reforms in labor laws weigh in favour of the investors and operate against the interests of both men and women workers. The loss suffered by women workers is more compared to men workers. Because men lose their relative bargaining power at the work place but continue to enjoy their power within the household. Women not only lose their bargaining power at the work place but also they lose their voice at the household. The low wage women get compared to men together with lack of social protection increase women's dependency for their basic survival needs on male members of the household and thereby weaken their voice within the household and hence their empowerment.

#### Conclusion:

Thus globalization empowers women when it not only provides increased employment but also social protection to them. Otherwise, the potential empowerment effects of wages are nullified by the growing gap between the need for social protection and supply of social protection.

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