



Women Labourers and Trade Unions in India: Adapting to Globalisation

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Abstract

The emergence of globalisation brings wide opportunities to workers of the world. At the same time, they may be subjected to certain severe crises. In this situation, trade unions closely watch all the developments happening in different parts of the world and the newly adopted policies of the governments. Economic liberalisation and flexible working arrangements offered wide employment opportunities to women, especially in the unorganised sector. Along with new opportunities, women are facing different kinds of exploitation in the labour market. Most of the employees of the unorganised sector are out of the purview of trade union support. In this situation, the labour unions should find new strategies to address all the issues facing women workers and act as the true agency for protecting their rights.

Keywords: Globalisation, labour force, trade union, liberalisation.

Introduction

Article 2 of the UDHR says "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin property, birth or other status" (UDHR 1948). The whole human beings on this earth has entitled to equality and freedom in their all aspects of life. In this situation the condition of labourers especially women labourers deserve special significance. The progress and advancement of the world owe a lot to the hard work from these categories of the population. But the idea of welfare of this class, their conditions of work, and relations to the trade union, all these are subjected to change in the changing circumstances of world order especially after the emergence of globalisation.

The process of globalisation also brings forth higher demand for female work force participation (Razavi *et al.* 2012) ^[1]. The gap between male and female work force participation has been narrowed down in advanced countries for the last 30 years.

Many factors contributed to the increase in women participation in labour force, especially in the unorganised sector, such as:

- i). Tremendous growth in the manufacturing and export processing zones worldwide demand more women as their labourers.
- ii). Job opportunities are created outside the agricultural sector or farm agriculture.
- iii). The educational progress attained by the women also contributed to their contribution in the paid work.
- iv). This century witnessed the falling birth rate which give more time to women other than the child caring function.

- v). The attitudinal changes which happened to the women also resulted higher rate of participation of them to the labour force.

All these favourable conditions provided momentum to women's arrival into the labour market in this century. But the discrimination that they are facing both inside and outside their working environment is very crucial. Enhancement of required skills, strengthening of networks, and provision for financial support like credit and cooperative initiatives are the various policies which promise to reduce the burdens carried by women workers (Thomas 1998: 14) ^[2]. According to the Report of ILO, for bringing male-female equality in wage rate require a minimum of next 75 years.

Along with the changes occurred in the unorganised sector, the organised sector also witnessed a number of issues in connection with globalisation. The downsizing which happened in the organised sector negatively affects the women labourers of organised sector. Traditionally, they are considered as the privileged class of employees who are enjoying all the social security schemes which are applicable to the employees by the legal system of the nation. Downsizing, re-arrangement of working time, outsourcing of their work, all these negatively affect the career prospects of the employees, the outsourced firms are not within the limits of the 'decent working environment' criteria.

Women and Labour Force in India

The liberal policies initiated during 1990s and after two decades of its experiences, the economy of India attained a double-digit growth (Sanghi *et al.* 2015) ^[3]. Globalisation opened up wide opportunities to women workers along with

challenges. Traditionally, women in India mainly confine to household activities. A smaller per cent of women engage in income generating activities. Out of this a minority, only a smaller section belongs to the organised labour sector. Large shares are in the unorganised and less privileged areas.

The large unorganised sector minority are beyond the coverage of the labour regulations in India. As it remarked by Arjun K. Sengupta (2010) ^[4], “there are too many laws for too few in the organised sector and too many in the unorganised sector.” There are many constraints which act as obstacles on the road to implementing the labour laws in unorganised sector in India. The limited strength of the enforcement machinery in relation to the large and dispersed workforce and inadequate infrastructure, almost exclusively focus on the organised sector. Lack of the voice for the unorganised workers and no participation of their representatives in ensuring effective implementation of labour laws and dearth of adequate sensitivity among those who are responsible for implementation of the labour laws are the major reasons for the failure to bring reforms in the unorganised labour sector.

Table 1: Growing Participation of Women in Labour Market in India:

2011	27.43	12.39	39.82
2001	26.78	12.35	39.13
1991	26.52	10.61	37.13
1981	26.43	9.27	35.7

Source: Census Data 2011

The liberalised transformation of economic system demands more energy, participation and competitiveness from the part of women labourers. English educated, skilled and academically qualified section of society gets enough chances to exploit this situation and attain prosperity both in economic and social level. But the socio-economic conditions of this society restrict, hinder and slow down the progress of women. The literacy rate of Indian women is only 65.46 per cent (Census 2011) ^[5], far behind men. The technical or job-oriented education is received only by a minority group of women compared to men. In short, they are far away from the advancement which expected by the modern world of labour. The government of India has introduced large number of programmes and projects to improve the literacy rate of women.

Educated healthy environment of the society bring far reaching changes in the economy. The health status of the working women in India is not better. The traditional conservative character of the society and family also hinder their progress. Despite of all the progressive efforts taken by the governments both at national and regional levels, activities of social reformers and NGO's, the female segment still struggle for achieving progress in education, socio-economic status, gender equality, better health care facility etc. In this situation, the changes initiated by liberalisation offer both chances and challenges to women.

Urban educated women have more chances to offer their working capacity in the labour market. They get higher income, more advanced amenities of life and enjoy improved social status. But it is not the case of all women. Very few of among women enjoy such a position. Majority of them are in unorganised sector, and enjoys very little such facilities. Their income is not favourable to meet their daily expenses. The condition of workers in unorganised sector is not favourable for them. They feel discrimination in working hours, lack of

facility to protect their health and clean environment, low income and other benefits, protective coverage and so forth.

Women workers in unorganised sector is always under pressure due to the competition from globalisation in the case of skill, new technologies, and etc. They get limited chances to uplift their capacities and skills. Poor educated women workers from low income families struggle with these kinds of situations. The downsizing in the public sector is crucial for women, because they constituted a chunk share of public sector workers traditionally (Razavi *et al.*: 2009) ^[6]

The legislation for equal opportunities and pays have little impact on the poor condition of the women labourers. Labour market inequalities have been increasing rather than decreasing day by day. Deregulation and casualization of employment impose more burden on the shoulder of working women. Women workers of the lower category have been most affected by these changes (Gregory *et al.* 1999:14) ^[7].

The mobility factor of women labourers is also critical. The traditional patriarchal character of society provides limited chances to move freely for job. So, in such a situation, they are forced to satisfy with the available conditions.

Trade unions give more preference to organised sector in India. But this sector is also under pressure. Recent reports show that the hold of trade unions in these sectors is gradually undermining. Workers from both the organised and unorganised sector seek new perspective and work culture from the part of labour unions.

Traditionally, trade unions are regarded as the agency of male labourers. Female labourers mainly perform the role of passive members. Only a minority shows active interest in these activities.

The trade unions in India give more importance to workers in organised sector. Many of the benefits enjoyed by the workers in organised sector are absent in unorganised sector.

But the condition of workers in organised sector is not satisfactory. They also face severe crises after the emergence of globalisation. Introduction of the scheme of VRS, downsizing the number of permanent employees, outsourcing, abolition of certain kinds of benefits offered by the system etc., are seen as signs of the crises.

Trade unions need to address the changing role of labour and their environment. Women labourers seek new kind of protection and support from the part of labour unions. Due to the existence of pressure, large number of women both from lower middle class and middle class came into labour market day by day. But their competency level is not favourable to achieve and exploit the new avenues. So, there is a chance to push them back and offer secondary treatment. In this situation, trade unions are the apt agencies to make the employment situation friendlier towards female workers. Otherwise, the condition of women workers will never improve.

The new employment policy of the government gives more preferences to the demands of employers. So, there is a chance to curtail the existing privileges enjoyed by the labourers. There is a chance from the part of women labourers to blindly obey the new regulations passed by the law makers which are pro employer policies without any kind of protest from the part of labourers. Women labourers are more submissive than their male counterpart in this respect.

Governmental machinery starts to simply observe the major regulations and give the remaining aspects to the consideration of the investors. Its reflection is seen in the new working conditions offered by the companies. In the case of working hours, benefits, protections and other matters, the

employers make certain changes which severely affect the existing conditions.

Compared to the condition of organised sector workers, the condition of workers in unorganised sector is more problematic. The organised sector constitutes a minor per cent of the total work force in India. The unorganised sector shares major portions. But it is the most neglected area. In this area, conditions of workers vary from firm to firm and state to state. Certain areas like advanced technology assisted IT, Insurance, Telecom enjoy more privileged positions. Less privilege is attached to traditional garment industry, food processing units, construction sector, agricultural sector and the like.

Conclusion

Traditionally trade unions are confronted with the issues of labourers with in the nation but at present with the emergence of large scale migration and immigration of labourers throughout the world, huge unemployment rate, diverse nature of workforce, inequalities, financial crises, etc., remind the need to re-strategising the role of trade unions. Under the era of globalisation, trade unions are facing a kind of crisis both internally and externally. This is because of high competition, trans-national mobility of capital, rise of worldwide production networks, work outsourcing to cheaper nations, strong resistance from the part of employers to unionisation, weaker labour rules etc. Along with these developments, the workers feel a kind of non-commitment to union activities.

The issues of good governance, developments within civil society and peoples' involvement in development programmes within Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) process or similar restructuring initiatives require a prominent role for worker, organisation. The PRSP approach was initiated by the IMF and World Bank in 1999.

Globalisation helped labourers to organise internationally to negotiate with employers and companies on a global level and to address common issues. It aided to create a global awareness on the issues like gender discrimination, sustainable development, and decent standard of work (Schmidt 2007) [8]. The U.N. also recognized the importance of unions to achieve broader goals of sustainable development. Unions must address the growing influence of private sector.

Trade unions are facing various challenges from different angles. Traditionally trade unions organise within national level and address only issues in local nature. But at present it must address issues in international level and face challenges resulting from globalisation.

Along with challenging globalisation, the new economic atmosphere demands more worthy and practical role from the part of trade unions. Modern labour relations are subjected to explicit and implicit struggles for labourers. In this complex situation, more creative interference from the part of trade unions is required to improve and protect the working condition and other rights of the labourers worldwide, especially the right of the women labourers.

Globalisation has benefited the women of the developed world and upper strata of the poor world. Though technological development has lessened the working task of highly educated and rich women, it has doubled the workload of women of the third world countries and has left many women redundant because of their outdated skills or declining industries. Social inequalities have imposed hardships on women who comprise around 70 per cent of world's poor.

Globalisation has greatly affected the role of women in the traditional agricultural society.

Women are concerned, globalisation means to work hard for less income. Globalisation has broadened up their role and functions. As consumers they buy products and as producers they work as labourers. They are also community managers, caretakers and home managers. Their working hours are longer, they have been forced to take an increasing burden of unpaid work in caring for the sick, obtaining food, cooking and serving, and ensuring the survival of the family. The globalised tendencies force the third world countries to decrease their legal minimum wage, working standards and work safety. Thus, a tighter connection is created between trade liberalisation and cheaper labour which becomes mostly a women's issue since women employment is a very important issue especially in developing countries for poverty reduction (Karadenizil 2002) [9].

Trade unionism and labourers, especially women labourers are subjected to the negative and positive impacts of globalisation. It offers both challenges and opportunities to both. Both male and female labourers and trade unionism need various dimensional changes to survive and struggle for their existence. Otherwise, the future is not bright for both.

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