

Research Paper

Rice Mill Workers in Gulbarga City: Problems and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that the unorganized workers constitute more than 90% of the workforce in the country. It is important to look into the issues relating to gender as the proportion of women workers entering the unorganized workforce has been increasing sharply, especially since the reforms of the early 1990s.

While there has been marked feminization of the agricultural labour market, certain other sectors have also been employing an increasing number of women – the domestic area is one such. In any sector, the wages paid to female workers are lesser in comparison to those paid to male workers, and this is more so in the case of the unorganized sectors. Further, women workers are subject to other kinds of subjugation and exploitation.

The changing structure of the enterprise in the globalized world is a major factor in the growth of informal work. Managements have reduced their labour costs through a range of strategies that relate to the deregulation of the labour market. These include the cutting down on the 'core' of permanent full-time workers, decentralizing and subcontracting all but the indispensable core activities, and relying wherever possible on insecure forms of labour – contract, casual, part-time, temporary, seasonal, on-call, dispatch. In the majority of cases, informal work is an integral part of global production and marketing chains. What is specific to workers in informal work is the absence of rights and social protection. In every other respect, and especially from the point of view of economic linkages, the formal and informal types of work form an integral whole. This is the context in which the newer debates began to be conducted (Gothoskar, 2003).

Workers doing informal work include all those labourers who work and who do not have any legal or social protection. These would include at least:

1. agricultural workers (include rice mill workers)
2. forest workers
3. fish workers
4. rag-pickers
5. construction workers
6. home-based workers
7. domestic workers or helps
8. street vendors or sellers
9. casual or temporary workers
10. contract or dispatch workers
11. workers in very small enterprises
12. part-time workers

Considering the complexities involved in defining the

nature of informal sector and also in view of the fact that it is continuously changing its form to include more and more occupations/activities, it is difficult to pinpoint a watertight definition of the informal sector and state its characteristics. However, based on the various studies done on its coverage and the parameters taken for collecting data on the sector, some characteristics can be said to be typical of this sector:

- Informal sector enterprises usually employ fewer than ten workers, mostly immediate family members.
- The informal sector is heterogeneous: major activities are retail trade, transport, repair and maintenance, construction, personal and domestic services, and manufacturing.
- Entry and exit are easier than in the formal sector.
- Capital investment is generally minimal.
- Work is mostly labour intensive, requiring low-level skills.
- Workers learn skills on the job.
- The employer-employee relationship is often unwritten and informal with little or no appreciation of industrial relations and workers' rights.
- The informal sector works in conjunction with, rather than in isolation from, the formal economy. It has increasingly become integrated into the global economy.

The unorganized sector makes a significant contribution to the national wealth; yet, workers in this sector do not have access to sufficient and reliable social security. Although the unorganized workers have some access to risk-management mechanisms such as micro-finance, their access to statutory benefits like health care, old age pension, etc., has been quite poor. These workers adopt informal strategies such as borrowings, sale of assets, etc, which are very expensive and their continued dependence on such strategies only renders them more vulnerable (Rajasekhar, et al).

The following table shows the estimates of employment in informal sector in Millions in 2006.

Table No. 1. Estimates of Employment in Informal Sector (in Millions), 2006

Sector	Male	Female	Total
Agriculture	142.46	90.33	232.79
Non-Agriculture	85.48	22.04	107.52
Total	227.94	112.37	340.31

Source: Redefining of Unorganized Sector in India, Report of the Expert Group on Informal Sector, May 2006.

The following table shows the area-wise and sex-wise distribution of estimated number of workers in Millions in 2006.

Table No. 2. Estimated Number Workers in Informal Sector (in Millions), 2006

Sector	Male	Female	Total
Rural	196.74	104.02	300.76
Urban	77.05	18.96	96.01
Total	273.79	122.98	396.77

Source: Redefining of Unorganized Sector in India, Report of the Expert Group on Informal Sector, May 2006.

Table No. 3. Per Thousand Distribution of Usually Working Men and Women by Occupation (Rural and Urban) in India

Occupation	Rural Men		Rural Women		Urban Men		Urban Women	
	1993-94	1999-2000	1993-94	1999-2000	1993-94	1999-2000	1993-94	1999-2000
Nursing and other Medical and Health Technicians	1	1	1	2	3	4	20	26
Teachers	13	13	13	13	23	22	105	111
Professional Technical and Related Workers	27	23	27	16	77	75	149	157
Administrative, Executive and Managerial Workers	10	16	10	9	64	90	32	54
Clerical and Other Supervisors, Cashiers, Stenographers, Typists, Village Officials etc.	15	16	15	4	91	89	69	71
Computing Machine Operators, Transport, Communication, Telephone and Telegraph Operation	3	4	3	0	11	11	4	5
Clerical and Related Workers	18	20	18	4	102	95	73	76
Merchants, Shopkeepers, Wholesale and Retail Trade	37	35	37	13	114	108	57	53
Sales Workers	51	50	51	18	187	184	86	90
Housekeepers, Matrons, Stewards, Maids, Cooks, Waiters and Related Workers	4	3	4	13	28	24	131	142

Launderers, Cleaners, Hairdressers, Beauticians etc.	8	10	8	10	13	12	16	19
Service Workers	20	24	20	27	77	79	161	180
Cultivators (Owners and Tenants)	408	377	408	343	39	31	54	42
Agricultural Labourers	275	278	275	417	29	20	102	81
Plantation Labourers	12	10	12	14	3	2	7	6
Farmers, Fishermen, Hunters, Loggers and Related Workers	735	704	735	834	88	69	195	148
Miners, Quarrymen, Well Diggers etc.	4	3	4	2	5	4	3	1
Metal Processors	1	1	10	1	6	5	1	2
Spinners, Weavers, Knitters, Dyers etc.	11	10	11	13	37	24	57	41
Food and Beverage Processors	5	6	5	7	13	14	13	10
Tailors, Dressmakers, Upholsterers etc.	9	9	9	8	28	28	45	48
Stone Cutters, Blacksmiths, Tool Makers & Tool Operators, Machinery Fitters, Precision Instrument Makers, Electrical Fitters, Electronic Workers, Broadcasting Station and Sound Equipment Operators, Cinema Projectionists, Plumbers, Welders, Sheet Metal Workers, Jewellery Workers, Metal Engravers, Glass Workers, Potters etc.	26	25	26	6	97	96	14	17
Bricklayers and Other Construction Workers	28	18	18	8	36	47	30	33
Transport Equipment Operators	21	14	14	0	56	64	7	3
Labourers not Elsewhere Classified	32	25	25	12	57	50	47	48
Production and Related Workers	163	141	141	92	405	405	303	294

Source: National Commission for Women Report 2001

Workers working in Rice Mills:

The rice mills process the rice from paddy. About 50 of such rice mills are functioning in Gulbarga city. It is interesting to note that the workers working in rice mills are grouped under the agricultural workers. Majority of these workers are illiterates or under-educated. The work to a greater extent is seasonal. Only few of the rice mills store the rice, which they process even during the off-season. In such cases, workers get employment during off-seasons. A few rice mills are seasonal, as they do not store and process the rice during the off-seasons. Under such circumstances, the workers of such rice mills are unemployed. Hence, the status of the workers working in rice mills shows the 'under-employment'.

As observed, the wages paid by the owners of the rice mills, they are lower and discriminatory. When conducting the present study, a few of the workers working in rice mills of Gulbarga city are interviewed. They have discussed their

problems at work and in their families. It is noted that the work of these workers is purely temporary in nature. As such, the working hours are long that is between 8 to 10 hours in a day. Further, it is noted that wages paid are discriminatory. In other words, wages are not fixed on a regular basis or based on extent of work or even working hours, but the wages are fixed as per the wishes of their employers. As expressed by many of the workers in rice mills, the work is not available for these workers in the mills for all the 365 days in a year, but is underemployed. That is, majority of these workers work for only 200 days and during the remaining days, many of them are unemployed or are engaged in some other occupations such as animal husbandry, tailoring, handicrafts, etc. Due to their work in unorganized sector, their socio-economic status is also low in the society. As per the information collected, none of the workers are aware about the labour welfare laws such as the Factories Act, the Minimum Wages Act, etc. Further, only few of the workers have availed benefits from welfare policies of the Government. The reason is that majority of these workers are not aware about such welfare schemes.

The information was also gathered from the employers regarding the work. Many of the rice mill owners stated that many of the workers are absent during the work and as such; there is considerable loss to their mills. Consequently, they are forced to pay lower wages. Frequent power cut problems faced by these mill owners had made them to incur the loss and as such, they can't able to give incentives to the workers and are also extended the working hours of the workers.

Suggestions:

1. It is suggested to look into the problems of the rice mill owners such as power cut, storage of paddy and rice, etc.
2. There is needed to fix minimum wages as per the law prevailed and enforce the related laws strictly in the rice mills.
3. It is suggested to provide awareness about the rights and privileges of the rice mill workers.
4. It is essentially needed to increase awareness of the workers regarding legal safeguards such as the Minimum Wages Act, the Factories Act, etc.

Conclusion:

Passing of legislations alone doesn't take care of everything. The enforcement agencies must intensify its implementation in the practical aspects. The ground realities are quite different from the legislative aspects. Mainly it is due to ineffective enforcement mechanism and lack of awareness among the workers about their rights and liabilities of employers under relevant statutes. There is a need for a unified legislation on rice mill workers that must provide, an independent enforcement authority for its enforcement at states as well as district level. Further, there is need on the part of the Government to enforce strict legislations pertaining to the life security of the women construction workers such as providing safety at the work places, subscribing insurance policies of the these workers, etc. The working hours should be strictly fixed for 6 to 8 hours for these workers. Further, the government should also look into the problems of the rice mill owners, so that the work in the mills should flow smoothly.

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