Problems of Poor Women in Urban Informal Sector in India: Some Policy Implications

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[Received: 16 November 2014; Accepted: 24 April 2015]

Abstract
In the present paper, an attempt has been made to study the various problems such as migration and displacement, feminization of poverty, complicated daily routine, lack of safety, poor civic amenities and lack of privacy of poor women living in urban informal sector in India. In view of some key sectors for women development such as health, education, nutrition, equality, empowerment, protection against exploitation and protection against violence, the present study suggests the policy implications on the basis of findings of the present paper.

Keywords: Migration, Displacement, Feminization of Poverty, Complicated Daily Routine, Lack of Safety, Poor Civic Amenities

Introduction
The concept ‘informal sector’ was first defined as that part of the labour-force in urban areas which is outside the organized labour market\textsuperscript{1}. It comprises the mass of ricksha pullers, hotel boys, shoeshine boys, construction workers, domestic servants, barbers, washer-man, thelawala, panwala, street wendors and others. Informal sector in the urban areas is the major source of employment in the formal sector. Owing to its capital intensive character, is very slow to absorb the increasing rate of growth of labour force. The urban informal sector gives readymade employment market to the rural migrants. Usually, the origin of informal sector is attributed to the massive out flow of surplus labourers from the agricultural sector in the rural areas. These rural migrants form a substantial part of the urban poor in informal sector.
The informal sector helps to some extent in removing the seasonal un-employment among the agricultural labourers and poor farmers. The income in the informal sector may be low but the chances of employment in this sector are much better than in the rural areas. Also, the standard of living in urban areas with medical, educational and municipal facilities, however, wretched they may be, is higher than in rural areas. The formal sector mostly depends on the informal sector. The informal sector’s supply of cheap workers to formal sector is its main contribution to the urban economy. The existence of formal sector is totally impossible without the help from the informal sector in all developing countries.

Women constitute nearly half of the human population on the Earth. Almost in all societies, women are considered inferior to their male counter-parts. The problem of the status of women involves equality between males and females. The women throughout the world have been considered the second sex-the inferior sex. If we look around, it is obvious that women in general and especially poor women are enclosed and brought up in the culture of silence. Their life starting, continuing and ending up in the darkness of silence.

Amongst those who are left out of any social protection system in India, and amongst those who are poor, women form a major group. Women dominate those forms of work that are unregulated and unregistered, found in most of the so-called ‘informal economy’. According to Visaria (1966), the informal sector in India employs about 90 percent of the country’s work force and 97 percent of its women workers. Many of these women workers are primary earners for their families. Their earnings are necessary for sheer survival.

Low-income women workers, especially in the informal sector form one of the most vulnerable groups in the Indian economy. The reasons for their vulnerability are irregular work, low economic status, little or no bargaining power, and lack of control over earnings; need to balance paid work with care for children and home work, little or no access to institutional credit, and lack of assets. Unequal gender relations assumes a very important role in defining their insecurities. Infect, according to the National Council of Labour, ‘the forces which control and sustain the vulnerability of women are institutionalized in society and in the economy.

**Problems of urban poor women:**

World-wide studies have shown that poverty is gendered and women are the worst victims of poverty whether it is urban or rural. Gender inequality keeps women at a disadvantage throughout their lives and stifles their development prospects and that of the societies they
Problems of Poor Women in Urban Informal Sector in India: Some Policy Implications

live in poverty among women continues and deepens because there is web of poverty. Lack of or poor education, denial of social and economic status or power, deprived of health care, responsibility of bearing and rearing children beside household work, lack of human security, exclusion from governance at various level strengthen the web of poverty strangling women across all communities but in particular women from dalits, adivasis, other backward castes and muslim communities.

Involuntary, migration compelled by many development projects, lack of resources and assets, lack of political backing and influence, coupled with illiteracy, patriarchal, caste, class and gender ideological socialization make urban poverty all the more severe for women.

There are some problems which bother urban poor women intensely. These are given as follows:

1. Migration and displacement as a challenge for women:

There is continuous migration from rural areas to urban areas. It is compulsion for rural people as pressure on the agricultural land is increasing. They com for good opportunities and better facilities, but in the process often ignore the problem associated. Usually people come from remote areas to new by towns and than to cosmpolitan cities. Women have to adjust and readjust again and again. Women are considered custodian of traditions and customs. They come to cities but carry all the dos and don’ts and disabilities which control the lives of women in rural society. Urban life has its own challenges. Eventually, women remain doubly disadvantaged and suffocated.

Besides, migration also means displacement. Women feel its pinch much more than men. They have a feeling of rootlessness in cities as often they go back to native places during festivals or harvesting seasons. They have no commitment or association for the cities in which they live. In fact, they are forced to lead the lives of semi nomads.

2. Feminisation of poverty:

Women’s powerlessness and resourcelessness has been discussed in great detail at Beijing conference in a report of 207 pages compiled by Women’s Environment Development Organisation (WEDO). The report says that in 150 studied countries women’s progress in negligible. At some places they have been actually forced to retreat. Zestlin and head of WEDO says that women are still the poorest of the poor, concentrated in informal economy.

In urban slums, women are often working not for comforts or luxuries but for making two ends meet. It is due to three reasons. First of all men’s earnings alone are not sufficient,
secondly, they do not give their earnings for household expenditure sometime. It may be due to certain bad habits like alcoholism or gambling. Third reason is irregular income of men. Most of them are either self employed or involved in private jobs which are not permanent. Women’s work as maidservant, vegetable seller or factory worker is comparatively more stationary. They are welcomed as labourers as they are cheap and docile. Sometime men feel that they are not getting jobs according to their qualification and prestige therefore, it is better not to work. Women usually have no such hassles. Consequently, they bear the burden of their families including unemployed husbands. In slums, we can often see men sitting at the corner playing cards (gambling) and women working hard inside and outside the households. Even that men own all the production resources and exercise their authority in this regard.

3. Complicated Daily Routine For Women:

It is not correct if we imagine that women in urban slums are working more than the women in rural areas. The work of later may be more tiresome but slum dwellers woman life is more complicated.

Collecting water from common tap, going to toilet at a filthy place, cooking and making sleeping arrangements and washing cloths and utensils - every activity is a challenge for her. Even bathing is sometimes difficult.

4. Lack of Safety and Securing:

Villages may not be very safe places otherwise but women find themselves secure in their native villages. Due to village exogamy widely prevalent in India, women and young girls are brought up in an atmosphere where everyone is considered their relative in the parental village. But when they come to cities, they find that the whole neighborhood is treating them as sex objects. Many people in slum areas keep sitting in the open space continuously because there is no place inside the small accommodation. Women have to do everything in front of them. Naturally they feel vulnerable to all kinds of atrocities, sexual violence and molestation in this atmosphere.

5. Poor Civic Amenities:

It is rather strange that India, in spite of being a home for countless rivers, is a water thirsty land. Safe drinking water is a dream. In the morning all slum witness ‘water wars’ in the queue in front of common taps. We can water survival of the fittest game. Water collection is a woman’s job; naturally her morning starts with tension.
As far as sanitation is concerned, a large number of slum dwellers have either no or badly maintained latrines. Sitting at the roadside for defecation is a big problem which they face every day. It also makes the whole atmosphere filthy. Health hazards created by unhygienic conditions also victimize women more than men because women are more often available in that surrounding.

6. Lack of Privacy:

Lack of privacy occurs due to two reasons. First reason is thick population in slums. Secondly, because of fragile dwelling construction. It is tin shade, asbestos sheet, plastic sheet or even a cloth which sometimes works as a wall. Naturally, everyone comes to know everyone’s most personal and private affairs. Activities like cooking, cleaning, washing and bathing are performed in front of everyone. More private affair like child beating, wife beating, romance, reproductive relations etc are such happenings which no one wants to share but in slums there is a forced sharing of such events also. Drinking of father, marital rap and drug addiction of adults spoil children. They develop maturity before age. Visibility of sexual activities makes women embarrassed and vulnerable. Privacy is a natural requirement and its absence makes the lives of slum dweller women difficult as their decency and dignity is challenged day and night.

It is generally believed that there is no other section of people in the Country whose story is so pathetic, whose daily life is so precarious as those of the women labourers working in urban informal sector, building construction industry in particular. The women labourers are exploited because they are illiterate, socially backward, mostly unskilled, unorganized, casual and poor.

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women.

Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, Plans and programmes have aimed at women’s advancement in different spheres. From the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards has been a marked shift in the approach to women’s issues from welfare to development. In recent years, 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 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India
have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels.

**Some Policy Implications:**

There are some key sectors for women development. These are health, education, nutrition, equality, empowerment, protection against exploitation and protection against violence. In view of these key sectors for women development, the present study suggests the policy implications which are given as follows:

1. To create more employment opportunities for women, so that the income level of the poor families can be increased.

2. The government should provide more attention towards the compulsory education programme. It will help in improving the female literacy.

3. The government should promote higher educational facilities. There should be special incentive packages for women education.

4. To create more awareness about women education in urban slums.

5. The network of distant education should be developed in urban slums.

6. Degraded environmental of the slum and its injurious impact on women is a matter of serious concern. Each and every should be cautious towards this grave situation. Thus, it is imperative for the individual, society and government to take part in improving the polluted environment of slum where poor women reside.

7. An appropriate sanitation technology for a given slum community has to be identified and implemented by the community itself. The technology should be such that provides the most socially and environmentally acceptable level of service at the least cost. Women should play a dominant role in shelter and sanitation programmes as women are generally greatly enthusiastic in such programmes. Women should be considered as the equal partner in implementation of action programmes.

8. Since women comprise the majority of the population below the poverty line and are very often in situations of extreme poverty, given the harsh realities of intra-household and social discrimination, macroeconomic policies and poverty eradication programmes will specifically address the needs and problems of such women. There will be improved implementation of programmes which are already women
Problems of Poor Women in Urban Informal Sector in India: Some Policy Implications

oriented with special targets for women. Steps should be taken for mobilization of poor women and convergence of services, by offering them a range of economic and social options, along with necessary support measures to enhance their capabilities.

9. As far as community participation in community development programme is related slum community would take active part in site and service programmes. It will give them a sense of social involvement and will grow social attitude towards this problem.

10. There should be training of people themselves in low cost shelter and sanitation technology, hygiene promotion and community organization with well defined role of women.

11. Emphasis be laid down on rural development and rural employment so that people may not migrate to cities. It will reduce the subsistence migration to the cities and ensure the long term success of relocation programmes.

12. As far as housing problem is concerned, an ‘incremented’ flexible housing planning for the urban poor would be the right approach to meet the needs and fit the mood of the people.

13. Ecological awareness be raised in the slum areas. For this a comprehensive information system and network should be established. Television and satellite technology may be of immense help in this context.

14. There should be an independent management group in slum which should be supportive unit of the existing slum improvement and rehabilitation agencies. The group should consider each and every activity in shelter and sanitation programmes for slum. An internal monitoring unit should be created for the operation and the quality of services in slum areas.

15. The involvement of voluntary organizations, associations, federations, trade unions, non-governmental organizations, women’s organizations, as well as institutions dealing with education, training and research will be ensured in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and review of all policies and programmes affecting women. Towards this end, they will be provided with appropriate support related to resources and capacity building and facilitated to participate actively in the process of the empowerment of women.

16. The National policy of women empowerment 2001 is to be implemented more vigorously in order to achieve the equality of women with men in all walks of life. Any attempt to improve the status of women, any weaving away from the patriarchal bias, any attempt undo the countries of injustice meted out on the other half of the society, any aggressive movement
forwards women autonomy must necessarily carry an economic base. Short of this it would only be a political platitude.

17. In order to support better planning and programme formulation and adequate allocation of resources, Gender Development Indices (GDI) will be developed by networking with specialized agencies. These could be analyzed and studied in depth. Gender auditing and development of evaluation mechanisms will also be undertaken along side.  

All the above mentioned policy measures will definitely help in improving the socio-economic conditions of urban poor women of the State of Chhattisgarh.

References


