

Empowerment of Women through Industrial Employment in a Backward Area of North India

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ABSTRACT The government of India encouraged setting up of Industrial units in backward areas granting subsidies and tax holiday. One such area is in the foothills of Shivalik hills in northern state of Punjab. Female workers of one yarn-producing unit were studied. This area is marked by large-scale emigration out to other states of India and to Western Europe, North America and Down Under. Contrary to the popular feeling, 95 per cent of women workers wanted to pursue their career, though keen to pick up jobs with better emoluments. Worker management relationship was found to be harmonious. Workers felt satisfied with respect to facilities like toilets, canteens, rest rooms etc. but wanted more in-house hostel facilities, better outlets for fuel for cooking and health care inputs. Coming from extreme patriarchal ethnic backgrounds, women felt empowered and were confident to pass on this new light to the next generation.

INTRODUCTION

Women live in two parallel worlds –one their own, centered around home and hearth, and the other – the larger world, the village, the town, the city, the society, where they play a somewhat marginal role. In an androcentric society, the cumulative effect shows diminished power for females (Miles, 1980). Wherever some women have shown streaks of empowerment, these are exceptions to the rule. By tradition, man has been the hunter and the food-gatherer charged with duties of earning bread while woman has borne the duties of increasing and tending the number the band (Gupta, 1986). Despite all words of praise, equal status has eluded the women all over the world. Policy interventions have been found far from sufficient to ameliorate the conditions of women (Schneider, 1969; Gisbert, 1972). Series of simultaneous changes like attitudinal shifts, facilitation of participatory decision making, cultivation of quality education especially at the elementary level and employment of women at appropriate places of work constitutes the recipe for empowerment of women. Emancipation of women is closely associated with their right to work (Nath, 1968; Prushothaman, 1998). This refers to paid work unlike most of the agrarian societies where work is regarded more as hardship rather than a privilege. In the developing world, manual

labourers are paid grievously low and the wage structure of agriculture and building construction work continues to be regulated by a system of payment, which is subsistent in nature. Women workers suffer further disadvantage of cultural load against their gender. United Nations reports mention that women form one-third of the total labour force of the world and do most of the unpaid work. They receive only 10 per cent of the world's income and own less than one per cent of the world's property (UNESCO, 1980; World Bank 1992).

Status of women has improved in the developed world with value addition to work. Women employed in white-collar jobs and upper category positions have done exceedingly well. It is the lot of the women-rural; unskilled; belonging to marginal castes and suffering from various socio-cultural disadvantages-which calls for special attention. In the era of globalization, the quality of labour force also needs to be upgraded. Employment opportunities in labour intensive industries in the rural and tribal belts have descended as a boon for women (Lambert, 1963; Morris, 1965; Ramanamma and Bambawale, 1987; Sharan, 1985). There are several pockets where the carrying capacity of the land is poor or natural calamities like floods or drought cause innumerable hardships to people. These push factors compel the populace to seek employment elsewhere. In India, government has encouraged

the entrepreneurs to establish industries in such areas by providing incentives like subsidies and tax-holiday. One such area is the foothills of the state of Punjab which has attracted quite a good number of industrial houses to set up their units. This activity is expected to bring out social and economic change for the people and consequently will affect the lot of the womenfolk. The present paper attempts to look at women workers employed in one of industrial units in the thriving Hoshiarpur suburbia of the state of Punjab in North India.

METHODOLOGY

Industrial Unit: Mahavir Spinning Mills Limited (MSML) was established in the year 1976. The unit is spread over an area of 55 acres and is situated on Phagwara-Hoshiarpur Road about 3 kilometres short of Hoshiarpur. The unit produces cotton yarns and all types of cotton and synthetic threads. The participative style of the management is focused through quality circles resulting in development of self-confidence amongst the employees. Problem solving and resolution of crisis enhances capacity building. Cross-functional project teams and groups enhance inter-departmental understanding.

Catchment Area: Hoshiarpur district boasts of the highest literacy rate (about 70%) in the state of Punjab. This area is known for its 'emigration-loving' people and early Punjab settlers on west coast of U.S.A. and Canada trace their ancestral roots to this region. The Shivalik Hills running from northwest and southeast alignment cover the entire length of the district. The foothill plains and flood plains of the Beas and the Sutlej rivers are criss-crossed by the seasonal rivulets which have remained the infamous 'sorrow' of the inhabitants since times immemorial. Poor carrying capacity of the land forced people to migrate to greener pastures abroad and across the length and breadth of the country. This region has been receiving large amounts of remuneration from the settlers in other states of India especially Assam, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and U.K., Canada, U.S.A., Southeast Asia and Australia for over hundred years now. The will to leave the home and hearth infuses a spirit of adventure and yearn for education. Traditionally neglected selection of society i.e., the women and the marginal castes thus found a new way to express and moreover

firmly assert their freedom by emigrating and by taking up employment in the non-traditional sectors. Hence, the populace was conditioned to get empowered through education, skill development and industrial employment comparatively earlier than the other parts of the Punjab. The area has a healthy climate with low population, widespread greenery and low congestion due to low population density of 369 persons per square kilometer. The area has villages with plural complexion and two or more than two co-dominant caste villages. Sainis form a large chunk along with Jats, Rajputs, Gujjars and Lubanas. Artisan castes of this area are a prosperous lot because of remittance economy and level of modernization is fairly high. The marginal castes from this area are socially upward mobile and have done very well in cornering the key positions in administration, police and state services because of empowerment through education. The process of *sanskritization* and modernization had 'set in' this area much earlier than most of the east Punjab of the colonial era. These factors conditioned the minds of the female labour force heralding a much needed transformation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Employees

This unit employs a total of 3882 workers out of which 756 are females who constitute 19.5 per cent of the work force. Almost half of the female workers have been working for about a year. Only 10 per cent of them have put in 15 or more years. On an average, female workers stay for about 4-5 years in the job tending to discontinue afterwards. The main reason for this 'dropping out' phenomena is matrimony and the consequent migration out of the neighbourhood. The ones who continue working after marriage are those married in nearby villages or whose husbands are also working with this unit (a meager 5 per cent). Few widows, divorcees or separatees continue working or comeback after sometime often to find their job the only reliable source of socio-economic security in the absence of any governmental or societal support.

About 54 per cent of female workers belong to marginal castes and a significant number i.e., 36 per cent belongs to middle castes. Only about 10 per cent of them belong to upper castes. About 20 per cent of the female workers are above the

age of 35 and about 60 per cent are between the ages 18 and 25 years. Most of the female workers belong to the neighbouring rural areas not more than 20 km away from the city. Those migrant women who are currently resident in the urban/semi-urban vicinity contribute another major chunk. A sizeable number of workers belong to the districts of Gurdaspur, Amritsar and neighbouring districts of Himachal Pradesh. The pull factor of employment brings them here. More than 70 per cent of the female workers belong to larger families consisting of 5 or more siblings. About 80 per cent of workers had none or 1-2 brothers with several sisters thus necessitating them to take up employment for raising adequate dowry. It is an interesting irony that the burdens of a ritualistic society should further the avenues for women's employment and consequent empowerment. Majority i.e. 65 per cent of the female workers is matriculate (tenth grade schooling) with 20 per cent below matriculation and about 15 per cent having passed senior secondary (12th grade schooling). A few had some years of college education. About 10 per cent workers lost their fathers quite early. Fathers of about 80 per cent workers are farm hands, labourers, small and marginal farmers, the fact which spells out one of the predominant and obvious reasons for increased female employment. The precipitation of a family financial crisis prompted taking up of employment, rather than any self or family motivated urge, will or enlightenment.

Route to Empowerment

Women workers find industrial employment a passport to empowerment. Though they remain busy at home but most of their work is unpaid. Even cottage industry and rural employment schemes like Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) etc. could not alleviate the conditions of rural poor. Poverty, demand of dowry, lack of adequate employment opportunities in the public sector has caused widespread unemployment among the rural youth. Young women further suffer a disadvantage, as families do not allow them to take up employment for away from home even if some avenues open up. Thus the industrial employment in the vicinity of villages has come as a blessing to these rural unemployed young people, especially women. Ethnographic method was

employed to study the villages, which form the catchment area of this industrial unit. Three villages were selected purposely for the study.

The Milieu

These villages are typical *Doaba* (land between Beas and Satluj rivers) villages, where almost every household boasts of a family member living abroad. Some of the houses lie permanently locked as the families live abroad. In some cases, a room or two are given to some employee posted in the village, who lives as well as acts as a caretaker. Most of the youngsters who are educated take up employment outside the village. Retired people or families engaged in agriculture and allied vocations are the only inhabitants living in the village. Most of the young males dream of going abroad and more often are hoodwinked by the notorious 'agents' who encash upon their ignorance about immigration laws and employability in the host countries. Women do not venture into this area except when it is a matrimonial proposal from across the oceans. Majority of the families belonging to upper socio-economic status does not want their daughters to take up employment as workers in the industrial units, preferring white-collar jobs instead. Even the lower socio-economic status families with three or four sons do not like their daughters to work there. More often it is the case of disadvantaged families facing hardships who allow their daughters to go out for work. The social system has evolved taboos on manual labour. At times the blue-collar job is stated to be a hindrance to get a suitable match for matrimonial purposes. The low socio-economic status families, marginal castes and the families with disadvantages find these jobs a boon. Such workers come from as far off places as Gurdaspur, Amritsar, Kangra, Hamirpur, Una and Ropar districts. They support their families back home and help them buy consumer goods, which enhance the prestige of the family. Owning a scooter, a colour television and such like goods allow these families mobility towards upper rungs of the social class. These workers help their families in raising dowry for their elder siblings and also keep buying gold ornaments for their own dowry. Several widows, divorcees and separatees have transformed themselves and their children into success stories. One of the senior workers did not like to settle down in U.S.A. and

discovered satisfaction working in this unit. Another senior worker provided support to her husband and his kinsmen to settle down near Hoshiarpur away from his native place.

Commitment among Women Workers

Labour productivity is directly related to the degree of commitment among the workers. Generally it is felt that the women workers are less committed than the men (Sharan, 1980). This notion has forced several entrepreneurs to stop hiring women workers. Sociometric analysis of labour commitment poses several problems. Indicators like absenteeism and turnover do not disclose the exact reasons as to why workers remain absent. Indicators must show the importance of attitudes, working condition, employer's behaviour, job satisfaction and management policies. It is believed that women workers are not committed because of the employer's behaviour, work conditions and labour policies. Their leaving an industrial unit may be involuntary. An attempt has been made to develop a composite index to measure the extent of commitment among the women workers. These workers are exposed to a certain kind of environment and condition of work, which they had not experienced while living in villages. Some of these are punctuality, communication channels, and orderly performance in an assembly line arrangement, tempo of work etc. The following factors are worthy of being taken as components for commitment of workers.

(i) Job Satisfaction: The stereotyped image of women workers is that they are not the primary bread earners of their family and thus they are not career oriented. This image is in for a shock as 95 per cent of the women workers who formed the part of this study wanted to pursue their occupational careers, though the feeling was that avenues for promotion being limited, they would try to pick up another job with better emoluments and quicker promotional avenues. As most of them could not pursue higher studies, they wished to pursue some vocational course work related to yarn production, which may also add to their social standing while negotiating for matrimony. Most of the respondents compared themselves to their contemporaries who either have gone for further studies or have picked up white-collar jobs. But they hastened to add that they are better off here as compared to some of their

acquaintances working in other industries or the small-scale sector. Promotions, increments, bonus and fringe benefits mainly decide the career outlook and preferences of these workers. By and large these workers felt satisfied with job conditions under their present circumstances and feel that they have an edge over others who cannot find work.

(ii) Conformity of employers to Industrial Labour Policies: The Labour act expects the employers not to put women on night shifts, provide maternity benefits, provide additional physical facilities like toilets, rest-rooms, crèches, nursery and hostel accommodation etc. Despite having to incur extra expenditure, management has good words for women workers because they are diligent, honest and sincere. The economics of production process being in favour of women workers, they get preference in this unit as compared to other industrial units.

(iii) Worker-Management Relationship: Human Development experts lay much emphasis on cordial relationship between workers and the immediate supervisors, because it has a lasting impression on the former's motivation and morale. This in turn affects commitment and job satisfaction. More than 85% of women workers regarded their immediate supervisors to be their equals and found higher echelons sensitive to their problems and helpful. The response of the workers indicates harmonious and positive relationship with immediate supervisors as well as with the management.

(iv) Wages: A trainee earns about Rs. 1500 per month and a worker with about two years experience gets about Rs. 2500 per month and a jobber (a step higher than workers) gets about Rs. 3000 per month. If these wages are not more as compared to similar work elsewhere, then these are also not less than a similar government daily wagger's job. About 60 per cent per cent workers wanted higher wages but 40 per cent felt satisfied with what they get.

(v) Promotion Prospects: Most of the workers (85 per cent) were not worried about promotion prospects because they wanted to drop out either after getting married or after getting some government job. They were aware that promotional avenues were very limited because out of 44 jobbers there were only 9 women jobbers i.e. a mere 20 per cent, but were sure of some promotion if they continue with the job. They were also apprehensive about diseases of the

respiratory tract if they continue for longer periods in yarn industry.

(vi) **Job Security:** Perceived job security or a feeling that she has a stable job is an important component of commitment of workers. More than 90 per cent workers felt that their jobs are secure because they do not give any chance of complaint and try to conform to the rules and regulations. Only 10 per cent women workers suffer from sense of insecurity and that also may be due to extraneous reasons.

(vii) **Amenities for Workers:** Generally workers want to have better facilities. Toilets, canteens, rest rooms etc. are found to be satisfactory. Commuting workers do feel the necessity of transport, which was earlier provided but has now been discontinued. Those who come from far away places and are living on their own have all the problems. Eve teasers, hassles with the landlords and midnight knocks keep them worrying. Hostlers feel satisfied and all are looking forward to the new hostel complex, which is coming up and appears to be quite modern. This will by and large take care of these problems. A chronic shortage of kerosene oil and consequent black marketing has been quoted as a major problem. Sometimes they have to take a day off to stand in the queue to get a little supply of the fuel. Management has helped to set up a Public Distribution outlet within the premises but that does not solve the problem. Some efficient means of biogas or liquefied petroleum gas shall have to be evolved to ease the situation. Despite sincere efforts of the management, employee's state insurance health care is woefully inadequate and is a major irritant for the workers. But for these problems, almost all the respondents show high level of satisfaction about the amenities provided by the industrial unit.

CONCLUSIONS

Labour commitment is viewed as a process of adjustment of women workers with their social life. Women workers here have taken their employment as a means to empower themselves. It has put them apart when seen in contrast with the unemployed ones. Consequently their commitment to work is fairly high. Empowerment is an individual and at another levels a collective feeling. It is in continuation with the wider psychosocial continuum. The feeling of helplessness and being driven like cattle from one hearth to another is the lowest point of powerlessness. Not

many years ago and not far away in the nearby hills, there had been the tradition of buying and selling women. Coupled with the extreme form of patriarchy, which is extent from the Pathan tribes in the northwest Himalayas to the Jat and the Rajput clans in the southwest of Indian heartland, this region could not have been expected to exhibit a different pattern. Though the philosophy of Sikhism and Arya Samaj, two religious sects devoted to gender equality in principle, had dented this mindset but the real liberation dawned when enthused with the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, the returnees from the U.S.A. launched a violent struggle for independence in the early part of the 20th century. Many of these freedom fighters belonged to the villages from this region. Emigrants also helped in ventilating the rigid minds of patriarchs, as they themselves had tasted empowerment through industrial employment on the foreign shores. Consciousness about education and higher incidence of literacy, especially the female literacy, has further empowered the women. Opportunities of industrial employment have sent in the whiffs of financial well being and independence among women workers from the low socio-economic status and marginal caste families. Away from the dung-heaps of the villages and the salubrious environs of a modern industrial unit strengthens the infectious ideas leading to empowerment. Next generation of women will inherit this positive feeling and is expected to show definite outcome of empowerment like the post-war women of the U.S.A. and Western Europe. This healthy beginning augurs well for the women of disadvantaged families belonging to these backward regions.

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