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## WOMEN WORKERS IN INFORMAL SECTORS IN ALIGARH CITY

### Doctoral Dissertation Abstract (2007)

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Contrary to the image projected world-wide of women fulfilling primarily domestic and child-rearing roles, the reality of most women lives is that they are obliged by poverty and deprivation to seek an income outside the home, either as the sole breadwinner or to supplement male earnings. In developing countries, when women are not engaged solely in subsistence agriculture, they tend to be involved in the so-called informal sector also known as the 'hidden' or 'shadow' economy.

The women doing manual work like agriculture, constructional labour and other sectors, home based producers including artisan and piece rate workers, women engaged in processing work in traditional and non traditional areas, providers of service like washer women, scavengers and domestic help, petty vendors and hawkers who do not hire labour except taking the assistance of the family members and all the poor labouring women in the unprotected sector are workers in informal sectors. (National Commission on Self Employed Women in Informal Sector, 1988).

The present descriptive-cum-diagnostic study of Aligarh city mainly attempts to focus on the socio-economic life of the informal women workers, the type of work they do, the place of work, their migratory status, their living, working and economic conditions, the problems faced by them both at home and at

place of work and their health problems. The study also highlights the intra-city differentials in the living, working and health conditions of informal women workers apart from examining their vulnerability.

The study is mostly based on primary data which was mainly collected by the author through household surveys with the help of questionnaire and interviews. The total sample size consisted of 1,000 informal women workers selected from the 10 wards of Aligarh city (five wards from the old part and five wards from the new part of the city). Field work was done during the years 2004 and 2005. For the purpose of selecting the sample, multistage stratified sampling design was adopted. For getting accurate information the sampled households were frequently visited.

The Aligarh city has been selected as the study area because it is an industrial-cum-commercial-cum-service city lying in the shadow of national capital New Delhi. After independence it has grown from a small town to an important centre for industry and learning. Out of the total workers in the city 10 per cent are females, while 9 per cent of the main workers and 18 per cent of the marginal workers are women (Census of India 2001)

The study is divided into three sections and spreads over six chapters dealing with concentration and distribution of the informal women workers, their housing, living, working

and economic conditions. Attempt has also been made to assess their problems at home front, at work place and related to health. The major observations of the study are:

- (i) The informal sector in India is the women's sector. Women constitute the largest chunk of the informal workforce. They work as piece workers, self employed workers, paid workers in informal enterprises, unpaid workers in family business, casual workers without fixed employers, the sub-contract workers linked to informal enterprises and also sub-contract workers linked to formal enterprises.
- (ii) The plight of the informal women workers is very miserable as they live and work in precarious conditions. There is no striking change in the status of informal women workers in the family and in the respect that they command in the society. Although they work and contribute to the family income they do not receive any preferential treatment in their family nor is the society respectful towards them.
- (iii) From the way they live it is evident that by going out to work, women have only undertaken a new assignment and have not really liberated themselves from the traditional situations. There is only a little change in the way a working woman now lives as compared to the way she generally used to live when she was not working.
- (iv) The employment of poor women is indispensable for the survival of individual families as well as for the maintenance of the wider socio-economic status. Women contribute substantially to the family income and are in addition largely responsible for the material and non-material needs of their children, husbands and other kinfolk. All major household jobs such as cooking, cleaning

and childcare are the primary responsibilities of women irrespective of whether they work two or eight hours in a day or whether their husbands are employed or unemployed.

- (v) The problems faced by the informal women workers at home front were many. Some of the important ones were regarding their dual responsibility both at home and at work place, ill treatment given by their husband and other family members, sharing of earnings, cultural constraints, negligible involvement in decision-making process and domestic violence.
- (vi) Informal women workers also face problems at place of work like; attitude of employers, long hours of work, low wages and no provision of leave, lack of provision of basic services, welfare programmes, social security and sexual harassment.
- (vii) Increasing sections of informal women workers lack access to organizational and political representation. At one level there is denial or lack of recognition that most of the workers are infact workers. At another level, by and large, organizations that have historically defended the interests of workers as workers, i.e. trade unions, are also within the perspective of the transparency of the employer-employee relationship. This makes it doubly difficult for women workers working in the informal employment to demand a voice within the framework of the existing organizational structures. Their work is characterized by; employment insecurity, income insecurity, legal insecurity and political insecurity.

Affirmative action is the only solution, right from homes to work places. Deifying

female energy as 'Shakti' (power) might assuage male guilts, it cannot help right the wrongs heaped on an oppressed gender that is resourceful and productive in more ways than one. Government policy and labour laws should be more vigorously directed towards ameliorating the living and working conditions of this vulnerable section of the society.

In spite of the fact that poverty forces many women to work, and in spite of the poor conditions under which they work, the impact of millions of the women coming into the labour force- as farmers, traders, factory workers, labourers has been overwhelming

positive. Women are sustaining the households all over the world and cannot be ignored or marginalized. The immense economic contribution of woman is being recognized, as well as, their social role. Giving equal value to reproductive as to the productive role, offers possibilities of a more holistic and human-centered approach of the structuring and development of societies, while it is impossible to see the final outcomes and the struggle is far from over, we must believe that an awareness has been created and a momentum built up that can not be reversed.