
VOICES OF THE WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS

D. Rajasekhar and R. Manjula

Reproduced with the authors' consent. Originally published in B.C. Prabhakar, *Gender Sensitivity at Workplace*, International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2006.

Introduction

Since the introduction of liberalization policies in 1991 there has been considerable growth of export earnings through the garment industry. This implies that the garment manufacturing witnessed considerable growth during the last one and a half decades or so. Did women and men, employed in the industry, equally benefit from the growth proceeds? The answer to this question depends on the following question. Is there gender sensitivity¹ at the workplace? This question becomes important because it has been noted that employers prefer women over men as both unskilled and skilled workers especially when an industry is growing. This is attributed to the following reasons: First, female labour is cheaper than male labour. Second, women workers are considered to be more docile, loyal and law-abiding in nature than men. Third, women workers are also more hard-working and sincere than their male counterparts. Finally, women workers have less contacts, exposure and bargaining power than male workers (Afsar 2002).

It is in this context that this paper analyzes the gender sensitivity at the work place of garment manufacturing in Karnataka. For this purpose, the data were collected from 151 garment workers from the cities of Bangalore and Bellary in Karnataka during the year 2006. About 63 percent of the sample workers were women.

A Brief Overview of the Garments Industry

India's ready-made garment industry, contributing to around 16 percent to total export earnings, is the largest foreign exchange earner in the country. Most of the growth in this industry occurred since the decade of the 1980s. The value of garment exports, which was only \$2 million in 1960-1961, sharply increased from \$696 million in 1980-1981 to \$2,236 million in 1990-1991, and to \$4,765 million in 1999-2000 (Chowdhury

¹ This term refers to being sensitive to different situations and needs of women and men in the decision making process for promoting gender equality. A workplace is gender sensitive if it does not aggravate the gender imbalance that already exists in society.

2005). The economic importance of the garment industry has, thus, increased phenomenally since the introduction of economic reforms in 1991. Karnataka is one of the states where the garment industry is witnessing a rapid growth.

In Karnataka, a majority of the garment manufacturing units are located in Bangalore City (The Hindu 2003; Roopa 2003). According to the figures provided by the Department of Labour, GoK, Bangalore, the total number of garment manufacturing units located in Bangalore city was 858 in July 2006. The number of workers in these 858 units was 195,943; of them, 67.3 percent were women workers. Thus, female workers constitute a major share of the workforce in the garment industry in the state capital.

The next important are where garment manufacturing is prominent in the state is Bellary City. Here, mostly the manufacturing of jeans, takes place. The city is dubbed as jean capital of India. We do not have any studies on the total number of workers involved in the manufacturing of jeans in Bellary. The Labour Department located at the district headquarters stated that there are 5000 workers involved in the industry, but it has not collected any statistics. The industry sources, however, put the figure at 10,000. Most of these workers are stated to be women.

In order to understand the male-female composition of workers, it is essential to understand the production process adopted in this industry (Chart 1). As can be seen from Chart 1, the production process is elaborate. The phenomenon of outsourcing is dominant in Bellary, while the whole production process takes place, by and large, within the factory premises in Bangalore. The merchant manufacturers normally control the process of cutting, quality checking and packing. They employ mostly experienced men in this process. On the other hand, garmenting and ironing are the two processes where the maximum proportion of the workers in the industry are employed. While the proportion of women is higher in garmenting, that of men is higher in ironing.

Thus, although women constitute a majority of the workers in the garment manufacturing, most of them are involving in garmenting. Let us now analyze the primary data to review the situation of garment workers by looking at their profile, wages paid to these workers, their working conditions and facilities that are made available to them. These issues have been discussed in the following sections.

Profile of the Sample Workers

This section provides a bird's eye view of the profile of the sample workers across the cities. It is evident from Table 1 that a majority of the workers (46.4%) were from the Muslim community followed by backward castes. A majority of the workers in Bellary were from Muslim minority, where as a large number of workers in Bangalore belonged to backward castes. A larger proportion of women workers belonged to the Muslim community. On the other hand, a relatively larger proportion of male workers belonged to backward castes.

About 61% of the sample workers were staying in rented houses (Table 2), which means that many of these workers were facing housing insecurity and had to pay in order to meet their housing needs. As far as the sanitation facility used by the sample household members is concerned, nearly half of the sample workers (especially in Bellary) did not have any sanitation facility available at home. Over 87% of the sample household stated that they regularly depended on public stand posts for accessing drinking water. Given that these drinking water sources are located at some distance from the households, the members of sample households (especially women) had to spend considerable time to fetch water.

A majority of households in both towns state that the supply of drinking water was irregular, and this posed enormous problems as far as accessing drinking water is concerned. IN this context, it is necessary to draw a distinction between promotional (housing, sanitation, drinking water, etc.) and protective (old age, health, etc.) needs. The foregoing discussion reveals that a large proportion of the sample households were unable to fulfill their promotional needs. This was especially the case of women worker households. A relatively larger proportion of the women worker households were living in rented houses. Since rented houses generally provide individual sanitation facilities, a larger proportion of women worker households have individual sanitation facilities.

Chart 1: Production Process of the Garment Industry

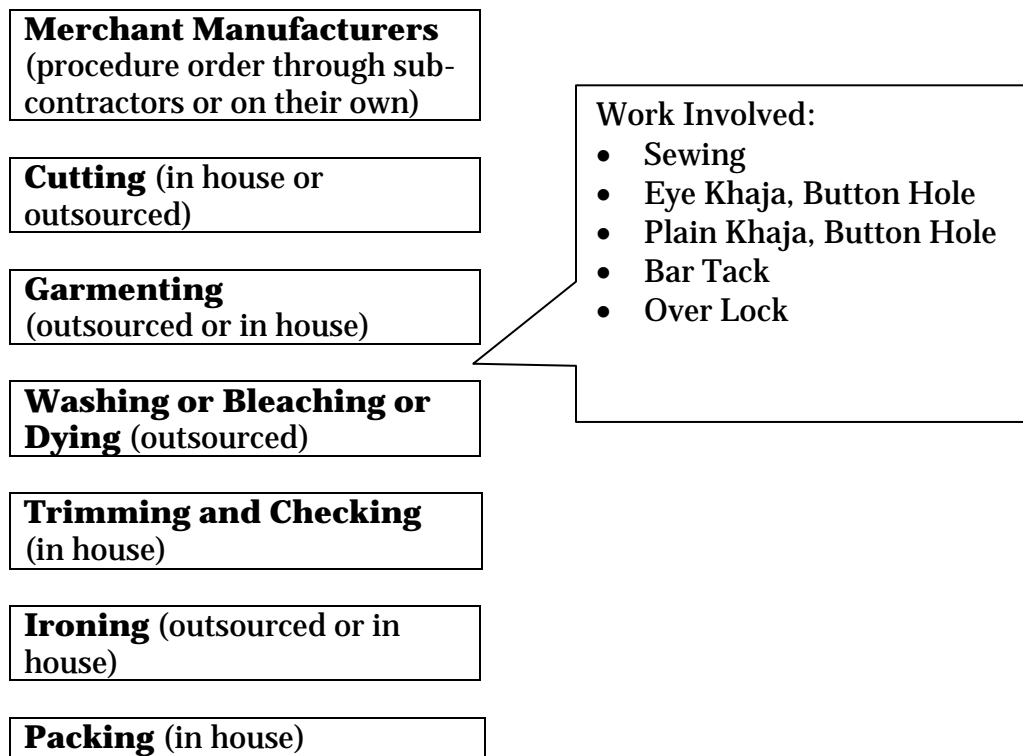


Table 1: Distribution of Garment Workers (%) by Sex and Caste

Sex	Caste				Total
	SC/ST	BC	Muslim	Others	
Male	3.6	51.8	42.9	1.8	56
Female	5.3	40.0	48.4	6.4	95
Total	4.6	44.4	46.4	4.7	151

Table 2: Basic Amenities of the Sample Garment Workers

Particulars	Male	Female	Total
Proportion of workers households living in rented house	48.2	68.4	60.9
Proportion of workers households not having individual sanitation facility	57.1	42.1	47.7
Proportion of workers households depending on public stand posts	92.9	84.2	87.4

The distribution of the sample workers by sex and age groups is provided in Figure 1. An inverse relationship can be found in the case of female workers. IN other words, there is a decline in the number of females working in the industry as their age increases. Most of these young female workers work only for a few years and discontinue their job due to marriage, birth of a child, etc. This implies that the young women workers leave the industry before they actually acquire the skills required to earn higher wages. The trend was the exact opposite in the case of male workers. In other words, the proportion of male workers working in the garment industry tends to increase as their age increases.

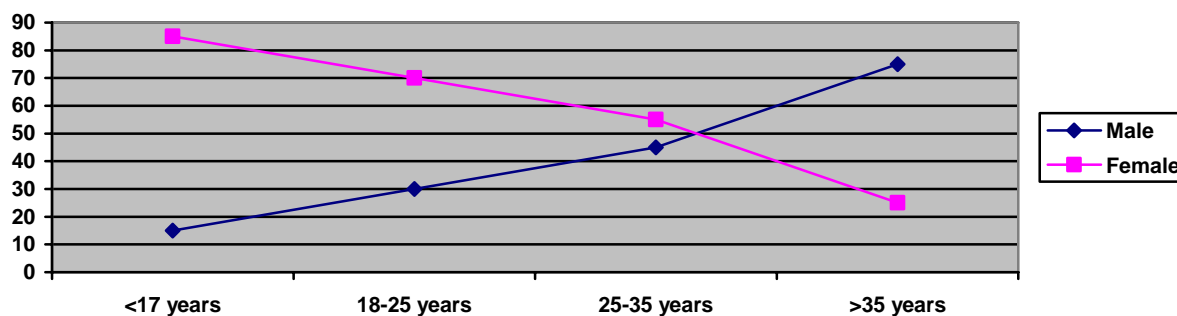
Figure 1: Distribution of garment workers (%) by their age group and sex

Table 3 presents the different types of activity undertaken by the sample workers. From the table it can be seen that a majority of the female workers in both the cities were involved in tailoring work. In Bellary, ironing has been completely a male-dominated job. This is in contrast to Bangalore city, wherein a majority of the workers involved in ironing were women.

Table 3: Distribution of garment workers (%) by type of work and their sex

Name of City	Type of Work	Sex	
		Male	Female
Bangalore	Tailoring	14.29	85.71
	Knitting	0.00	100.00
	Checking	100.00	0.00
	Ironing	20.00	80.00
	Helpers	5.00	95.00
	Others	33.33	66.67
Bellary	Tailoring	35.48	64.52
	Cutting	100.00	0.00
	Ironing	100.00	0.00
	Others	50.00	50.00

Wages Paid to the Garment Workers

There are two types of factories in Bangalore city. The first type is in the one, which pays minimum wages and provide social security benefits to workers. These factories provide work contracts, which also mention the benefits to be paid to the workers. The second type of factories frequently violates the minimum wage and social security norms. Further, the work contracts mention the duration, and impose conditions that workers can be removed if they do not meet the targets. There is no reliable data on the composition of the industry by these two types. But, the discussions with workers, trade unions and the government revealed that the first category is becoming important in Bangalore. The reason attributed for this is the growing importance of the industry in term of exports, and the need to maintain certain labor standards. Further since the rapid growth of the industry has resulted in tightening of the labor market, the units have to keep the workers. For this reason, they pay minimum wages and provide social security benefits.

The workers in Bellary on the other hand are paid on a piece-rate basis. The representatives of the government, industry and trade unions were of the opinion that the wage rates tend to be close to the minimum wages fixed by the government. Let us know analyze the data on wages paid to sample workers.

The Government of Karnataka has fixed minimum wages by various types of work carried out by those employed in the garment manufacturing in different zones. These minimum wages are also periodically reviewed. The minimum wages fixed by the

Government of Karnataka for various types of work in the garment industry in Bangalore and Bellary cities are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Minimum wages as fixed by the Government of Karnataka

Category of Work	Bangalore	Bellary
Tailored (skilled)	94.76	93.76
Cutting Machine Operator (skilled)	94.76	93.76
Ironer (semi-skilled)	93.26	89.26

Source: GoK (2006)

We have considered only three categories of the workers from the sample for the analysis of wages received by male and female workers. This is because of two reasons: First, in our sample, these categories were important. Second, a comparison between cities and men and women is possible. Wages paid to sample workers as a proportion to minimum wages fixed by the government were calculated to analyze the extent of which sample workers benefited from the minimum wages fixed by the government, and to see whether there were differences between men and women.

From the data presented in Table 5, the following observations can be made. First, the proportion of wages obtained to minimum wages tended to be higher in Bellary in the case of men. This implies that when wages are paid on piece-rate basis, men tend to benefit much more than women. Second, the proportion of actual to minimum wages was less in the case of women as compared to men in both the cities. Third, the wages obtained by women in Bellary were less than those obtained by their counterparts in Bangalore. This analysis implies that the women do not benefit much if the wages are paid on a piece-rate basis. The policy implication is that since time-based wages suit women, they are to be introduced if gender balance is promoted.

Table 5: Wages paid to sample workers as a proportion to minimum wages fixed by the government

Category of Work	Currently paid wages per day as a proportion to minimum wages fixed by the government			
	Bangalore		Bellary	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Tailor	118.19	10.2.08	135.058	65.60
Cutting master (operating machine)	NA	NA	170.78	NA
Ironer	96.50	83.37	137.16	NA

Note: NA = Not Applicable

Table 6 provides the sex-wise distribution of sample garment workers by the wages that they receive per day for different types of activities. As many as 68% of the male workers were getting more than Rs. 90 as their daily wages compared to only 22% of the women workers. A majority of the women workers were getting their daily wages in the range of Rs. 50-75. This clearly shows that they women workers were deprived of the statutory minimum wages.

Table 6: Wages paid per day by sex and type of activity

Sex	Type of Work	Wages paid per day (in Rs.)				Total
		<Rs. 50	Rs. 50-75	Rs. 75-90	>Rs. 90	
Male	Tailoring	7.69	15.38	11.54	65.38	26
	Cutting	0.00	0.00	16.67	83.33	6
	Checking	0.00	0.00	50.00	50.00	2
	Ironing	0.00	12.50	18.75	68.75	16
	Helpers	0.00	100.00	0.00	0.00	1
	Others	0.00	0.00	20.00	80.00	5
	Total	3.57	12.50	16.07	67.86	56
Female	Tailoring	15.63	43.75	12.50	28.13	64
	Knitting	0.00	50.00	50.00	0.00	2
	Ironing	0.00	50.00	25.00	25.00	4
	Helpers	0.00	52.63	42.11	5.26	19
	Others	50.00	33.33	0.00	16.67	6
		Total	13.68	45.26	18.95	22.11

One must also find out the reasons why the wages paid to women are less as compared to those paid to men. An important contributing factor is the inverse relationship between age and proportion of women workers. While most of the women workers were young, male workers were in the middle-age groups. This implies that women tend to leave the industry even before they acquire the required skills to earn higher wages due to factors such as marriage, childbirth, etc. This might give an impression that women workers and their households were responsible for women leaving the industry at a young age and not obtaining higher wages. This is simply not true. As we shall discuss below, gender discrimination contributes to the early departure of women from the work.

Statutory Benefits to Garment Workers

In Bellary, none of the sample workers have accessed any of the statutory benefits, other than bonuses, that are made available by the government for these workers (Table 7). This bonus was also nominal in the sense that each worker was given a small cash amount (Rs. 100-200) and a box of sweets at the time of Diwali. Further, almost all the sample workers were not even aware of these statutory benefits. While in Bangalore, the

situation was better. The awareness on these benefits was quite high among the sample workers. Two reasons have contributed for the workers in Bangalore city to avail most of the statutory benefits. First, workers in Bangalore were having direct employer-employee relationship. As Rajashekhar et al (2006) has pointed out, the work-based entitlements tended to be better in the case of workers having direct employer-employee relationships.

As mentioned earlier, the workers in Bellary were not having direct employer-employee relationships. This is one of the reasons why the workers in Bellary did not have any access to statutory benefits. Another reason was the lack of awareness about the statutory benefits among the workers. As several studies have pointed out, most of the government's anti-poverty programmes lack the proper marketing of the programme. In other words, sufficient awareness about the programme was not provided to be intended beneficiaries (Rajasekhar and Manjula 2005).

Work Conditions and Facilities

The tailoring units in Bellary where workers were employed on a piece-rate basis were typically very small. At best, these units comprised of two small rooms (each room having about 100 to 150 sft space). It is usual sight in Bellary to find 10-15 persons working in each room having poor light and air ventilation. For usage of toilets, women workers have to walk up to the owner's/employer's house which would be in the radius of about ½ km. A small pot with a glass will be kept in one of the corners of the room for drinking water to the workers. Usually the workers comprised of young girls and boys who are less than 25 years of age.

In Bangalore, the work conditions are better especially in the case of registered factories. The workers mentioned that the facilities of crèche, ayah, playing equipment, etc. were provided to them. The facilities of drinking water and toilet were also made available within the factory premises. It should be however noted that these facilities were not uniformly provided in all the factories. The focus group discussions with the workers revealed that only in three out of every four factories such facilities were provided in Bangalore.

A major problem faced by the workers has been the targets fixed by employers. Different targets were fixed for different types of the work. It appears that there targets are stiff (generally 3-4 times the capacity of the worker) and cannot be achieved by anyone. According to the workers, even employers are aware of this. Even then, such stiff targets are fixed to have effective control on workers. The modus operandi is as follows. The work contract handed over to the employees incorporates the clause that the targeted fixed by employers should be met and that factories can remove workers if they frequently fail to meet the targets. This imposes an enormous burden on workers especially women since they can only be involved in tailoring jobs and they cannot undertake other non-farm activities. Second important feature of the targets is that the targets are fixed and enforced by men in the units.

These two features of targets are particularly disadvantageous to women workers. If a worker is not able to achieve targets in a day, she/he is asked to complete the work during the extra time. While men often stay back to complete the work, women cannot do that because of the difficulties involved in late night travel, need to participate in domestic chores and sanctions imposed on them by spouses or parents. This imposes burdens on them, and results in their early exit from the industry.

The monitoring of targets by men seems to be posing a lot of problems to the women. The men, who monitor the target achievement almost on an hourly basis, abuse workers for the slacking, which is bound to happen given the stiff targets. The abusive language often assumes gender connotations in this industry. If newly married women slack, reference will be made to the “activities of the bed the previous night”. If a young girl slacks, the male supervisors use the language of enquiring whether they have had pre-marital sex. If a woman often visits the toilet, the reference will be to menstruation. Unable to bear this, several women simply leave their jobs, although minimum wages are paid and statutory benefits are provided.

Table 7: Distribution of Garment Workers by their access to statutory benefits

	Yes	No but Aware	Not even aware	No information	Total
Employee’s State Insurance					
Bangalore	40.00	58.33	1.67	0.00	60
Bellary	0.00	1.10	98.90	0.00	91
Total	15.89	23.84	60.26	0.00	151
Minimum Wages					
Bangalore	18.33	25.00	53.33	3.33	60
Bellary	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	91
Total	7.28	9.93	81.46	1.32	151
Bonus					
Bangalore	76.67	21.67	1.67	0.00	60
Bellary	4.40	2.20	93.41	0.00	91
Total	33.11	9.93	56.95	0.00	151
Provident Fund					
Bangalore	58.33	41.67	0.00	0.00	60
Bellary	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	91
Total	23.18	16.56	60.26	0.00	151
Gratuity					
Bangalore	16.67	46.67	36.67	0.00	60
Bellary	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	91
Total	6.62	18.54	74.83	0.00	151

The women also informed that they cannot voice these problems due to fear of losing their job and the lack of trade unions among them. In fact, some of the factories remove women if they come to know that they are interacting with trade unions. The workers informed that some of the women, unable to bear the fear of losing their jobs, resort to “adjusting with male supervisors”. Further probing revealed that male supervisors expect women to meet their emotional and physical needs. If a woman becomes a victim of meeting such needs, the treatment will usually be different. But, such women face enormous psychological and emotional problems that they often leave the job.

Conclusions

Garment manufacturing witnessed considerable growth during the post-liberalization period. Did men and women benefit from this growth equally? Women constitute a majority of the garment workers. The evidence on wages presented in this paper shows that the women did not benefit from the phenomenal growth of the garment industry. The wages paid to women were much lower than the minimum wages. An important reason for this was that women did not stay in the industry long enough to gain skills and experience to receive higher wages and salaries. Women leave the industry early due to gender-based discrimination practiced in the industry. Introduction of time-based wages is urgently needed to promote gender equality in the industry.

References

- Afsar, Rita (2002). “Gender Dimensions of Labor Migration in Dhaka City’s Formal Manufacturing Sector” in Carol Miller and Jessica Vivian (eds.) *Women’s Employment in the Textile Manufacturing Sectors of Bangladesh and Morocco*, UNRISD.
- Chowdhury, Supriya Roy (2005). “Labour Activism and Women in the Unorganized Sector: Garment Export Industry in Bangalore”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40 (22): 2250-55, May 28-June 4.
- GoK (2006). “Scheduled Employments Under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, and the Notified Current Rates of Minimum Wages from 01-04-06 to 31-3-07”, *Karnataka Labour Journal*, Department of Labour, Government of Karnataka, June Quarterly Issue.
- Rajasekhar, D. and R. Manjula (2005). *Food Security Through Wage Employment: A Study of SGRY Programme in Karnataka*, Paper presented at the National Consultation on Food Security for the Poor held at NIRD, Hyderabad, during June 27-29.
- Rajasekhar, D., Suchitra JY, S Madheswaran and GK Karanth (2006), *Design and Management of Social Security Benefits for Unorganized Workers in Karnataka*, New Delhi: GTZ.
- Roopa, M (2003). “Garment Workers: Identifying Legal Issues and Strategies”, paper presented at the Consultation on Labor Standards in the Indian Garment Industry, Bangalore, September 29-30.
- The Hindu (2003). “Garment Factory Workers Deserve a Better Deal”, September 28.