
WOMEN AGARBATHI WORKERS: CONTRIBUTING A LOT BUT OBTAINING VERY LITTLE

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Introduction

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 labor market, certain other sectors have also been employing an increasing number of women – the agarbathi industry 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 main objective of this note is, thus, to expose some bare facts about gender sensitivity or the lack of it, at the workplace by taking the agarbathi industry as a case. The data used in this note includes both secondary data and primary data collected through a survey of 152 agarbathi workers and several agarbathi manufacturing units in Bangalore and Mysore cities.

A Brief Note on the Agarbathi Industry

Agarbathi manufacturing is a highly labor intensive industry characterized by low capital requirement and simple technology. The production process in the agarbathi industry involves the acquisition of the raw materials, mixing of the jigat, rolling of agarbathis, drying them, perfuming them (if not pre-scented) and packing them. The industry employs both men and women but a majority of the workers are women – nearly 90% of the workers are estimated to be women (Bajaj 1999). Women most carry out the agarbathi rolling, while men undertake the task of perfuming or dipping of non-scented sticks. Packing is a task that is usually undertaken by both men and women, more the former than the latter. In this production process, the value addition takes place mostly after the rolling is complete. Thus, while women are involved in the low value addition activity of rolling, men are mostly involved in scenting and packing, etc.

This study of Bajaj also shows that the entire labour and basic raw materials cost accounts for just 10 percent of the total cost of production, which shows the extent to which labour is exploited in this sector.

A major proportion of the agarbathi manufacturing in the country takes place in South India, especially in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu because of the high availability of the raw materials and abundant cheap labour. In all, there are an estimated five lakh agarbathi workers in the country and Bangalore and Mysore cities are said to employ more than 50% of the workers, many of them migrants from other South Indian states (Kaur 1999). Two types of agarbathis are manufactured. The first type constitutes the pre-scented ones, i.e. the paste that is rolled out already contains the perfume and therefore all that is required by the workers is to roll the agarbathis and dry them. These agarbathis have a shelf-life of up to 10 years. The second type of agarbathis consists of those which are first rolled and then dipped in some chemical substances which contain the perfume. These typically have a shelf life of about one year. The equipment used for agarbathi rolling is a low wooden board 3 sq. ft. in size around which the workers squat rolling sticks on the board.

Agarbathi manufacturing takes place in both factories as well as a home-based occupation. In the recent years, there has been greater informalization and casualization of this industry with more and more factory units sub-contracting the work to women who undertake the work at their homes. The general trend is for manufacturers to subcontract the work of rolling to home based women workers, while within the factory, a few workers are retained for quality control and higher quality produce. Home based agarbathi workers are given the raw material of bamboo sticks, jigat powder and charcoal by contractors or units for rolling. They are paid some amount for every thousand agarbathis rolled. The factory workers are paid either on a piece-rate or daily, weekly, monthly wages, which differs from one factory to another.

Findings of the Study

In order to discuss the issues relating to gender sensitivity at the workplace, we have made use of the data collected for a larger study. The findings, as discussed in this section, are based on the study conducted in Bangalore and Mysore in August to September 2006. This survey covered 109 workers in Bangalore (in the areas of Chamrajpet and Srirampura) and 43 workers in Mysore (in Ghousiananagar and KN Pura). The survey covered only women and mostly agarbathi rollers of whom 30% rolled either at factories or directly for the factories and the remaining workers were home based workers who worked for contractors.

Nearly 40% of the sample workers are Muslim, while 1/3 belonged to the scheduled castes. Only less than half of the workers had their own houses, while 95% had acquired independent electricity connections. More than 90% had access to either community or individual sanitation facilities. The proportion of workers depending on public sources of the water supply was 58% while 42% had private household water connections. Around 70% of the workers said that they had access to adequate drinking water

throughout the year. Although all these workers belonged to the lower economic strata, over 25% did not possess ration cards and therefore had to depend on the open markets for food grains.

Wages Paid to Workers

The government has stipulated minimum wages rules for most of the unorganized sector occupations including agarbathi rolling. As of March 2006, the Government of Karnataka has specified minimum wages for agarbathi workers depending on the type of work they undertake, such as rolling, perfuming, packing, etc. (Karnataka Labour Journal 2006). Among the rollers, there are different rates specified for rolling of agarbathi sticks of different lengths between 6 and 13 inches. The smallest amount supposed to be paid by the employers is Rs. 23.75 per 1000 agarbathis rolled – this is for the 6 inch agarbathis. One would expect that if not in the case of the home-based workers, at least in the case of the factory workers, these wages would be paid.

The data collected from sample agarbathi rollers show that neither the home based nor the factor workers were availing minimum wages. The wages obtained were between Rs. 9 and Rs. 16 per 1000 bathis rolled, depending on the length of agarbathis. The average amount of wages per 1000 agarbathis rolled was Rs. 12.48. There were some differences between the wages paid in Bangalore and Mysore – while in Mysore, no worker was paid more than Rs. 13 per 1000 agarbathis, the situation was marginally better in Bangalore, where around one-third of the workers are paid at least Rs. 13 or more.

Further with respect to the home based workers who usually got their employment through layers of contractors, they had to pay some proportion of their wages to the contractors, and often, the workers ended up getting just around Rs. 9 per every 1000 agarbathis rolled. Many workers also said that the employers often cut the amount due to them attributing it to wastage of agarbathis, in the name of quality control. Etc. They said that there were times when they lost up to Rs. 7 per 1000 agarbathis due to such reasons. The average salary would be around Rs. 600 per month to Rs. 700.

The wages paid were thus very low. When wages obtained by women agarbathi rollers are compared with minimum wages, the pattern is as follows. More than 30% of the workers were paid less than 50% of the stipulated minimum wages, while no worker was paid more than 70% of the minimum wages. The discussions with men employed in dipping and packing revealed that they were all obtaining minimum wages. This shows the extent to which the women workers have been economically exploited, and besides, it also had considerable implication for the health and education outcomes of these households. In the absence of minimum wages, they can hardly send their children to school and avail of health benefits.

Astonishingly none of the women agarbathi rollers was even aware of the minimum wages. The enforcement of minimum wages is so poor than it is little wonder that the women workers are neither aware of the exact wages nor do they avail of such wages.

The lack of awareness among the workers shows the insensitivity towards women and their rights.

Working Conditions

The working conditions are another important aspect of the unorganized sector work, and are of particular importance to the women workers. In the factories, typically 10-20 agarbathi rollers are accommodated in small rooms (usually 10 by 15 feet) which are poorly lit, poorly ventilated and very cramped. Due to the charcoal powder and jigat powder that is used, the walls of the room are dark with soot, which makes the lighting even worse. The sawdust that the workers dip their hands while rolling leads to clouds of dust in the rooms.

In such an environment, women workers roll agarbathis sitting at their wooden planks and are given targets for each day. The only things they do through the entire day are to continuously roll the agarbathis in order to meet these targets. While we were at the factories, we noticed that the workers, in spite of sitting beside each other did not even speak to each other to break the monotony. They were permitted few breaks. Factories seldom had toilet facilities, and workers who took breaks to use the toilets were often reprimanded by the employers. There was no access to safe drinking water within the factory premises. While factories employing 15 workers are more are mandated to provide crèche facilities, we did not find a single unit which complied by this law and worked were often to bring their children into the factories. Another interesting detail is that the supervisors would seldom allow strangers to enter the factories and talk to the workers in the absence of the owners.

In comparison, the working conditions of the home based workers were far superior. These workers were much more at liberty to work at their leisure. If at all they had any targets, they were fixed by themselves and were therefore not as severely pressurized as the factory workers. They could take breaks as often as they wanted, not only to break the monotony but it afforded them the time to attend to other household chores. While we visited some slums in Bangalore, we found that the workers were all seated at their doorsteps in open air and they would talk to each other while working.

Given such a marked difference between the two set-ups, it is necessary to understand why so many women still go to work in the factories. Three reasons are cited for this. First, some factory units do not allow rolling at homes especially when the scented agarbathi are being rolled. There is a suspicion that the workers may not properly account for the raw materials provided if rolling is allowed at homes. Second, many of the workers live in very small houses, which do not offer them the luxury of working from their homes, and there they are forced to be factory workers. Third, the impression among workers is that they can roll a larger number of agarbathis if they undertake the work in the factory unit.

Health Problems

Due to the nature of the work in agarbathi rolling, which involves being slouched continuously and using the hands and shoulders, especially the right shoulder, almost all women workers have shoulder and back trouble, which becomes worse as they age. Many also develop gynecological complications early in life. These health problems become a constraint because with body aches and pains, the workers can seldom meet the targets they are expected to and therefore, their productivity and wages come down with age. The workers often do not even treat these aches and pains with any seriousness because it only leads to greater expenditure for them.

Social Security Benefits

Given that the agarbathi industry functions in a factory set-up, it comes under the purview of the Factories Act and the various schemes under this act, such as the Workman's Compensation Act. Further, the agarbathi factories are mostly registered units and therefore the employers are expected to register the workers compulsorily under the Employee's State Insurance (ESI) and Provident Fund (PF) schemes towards which both the employers and employees can contribute. Depending on the size of the manufacturing units and the number of employees employed, the employers are expected to provide them with other facilities like canteens, crèches, etc.

Our data, however, shows a fairly poor level of awareness and availing of the different social security schemes amongst the workers. While more than 50% of the workers were aware that they were entitled to ESI and the PF schemes, practically none of the workers were aware of the gratuity and minimum wage rules. When it comes to the bonus, all the workers were aware that they were entitled to it and most of the workers have got the bonus in the form of a sari, a kitchen utensil, etc. in the past year. An important reason for such lack of awareness has been the social organization of production. As mentioned earlier, a large bulk of the agarbathi rolling is subcontracted to the workers through contractors, and therefore, the workers direct relationship with the employers is curtailed to that extent. The employers also have a vested interest in not having permanent employees so that they do not have to contribute towards these workers' social security. And given that the agarbathi workers are mostly women, their levels of organization and bargaining power are so low that they are unable to take up the cause against employers.

Conclusions

In this note, we have shown how the workers in the agarbathi industry are an exploited lot. Unarguably, all unorganized workers are poorly treated to varying degrees by the employers, but such exploitation takes alarming proportions in the case of an industry where a majority of the workers are women and most of the employers, supervisors, contractors, etc. are men. Here in addition to bare economic exploitation, there is also an element of gender bias – many employers function with the notion that female

workers constitute the weaker sex and therefore they can squeeze more out of them at much lesser costs. Such attitudes only aggravate the already existing deep gender biases in society. Two lines of intervention are imperative. For the factory workers, the conditions of work have to be improved, in terms of providing larger and better lit and ventilated rooms, provision of toilet and drinking water facilities, canteens and crèches, etc. for all workers and in particular the home based workers, the minimum wage laws have to be strictly enforced. Although all of these laws exist, there are nay number of loopholes at the implementation stages, calling for better monitoring and enforcement. The most important step that the state can take towards correcting this situation is perhaps to not just design policies on paper, but actually enforce them in the field.

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