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GENDER KNOWLEDGE OF FEMALE TEXTILE WORKERS IN WEST BENGAL

SOHINI BASU

Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

ABSTRACT

This article rediscovers the identities of women workers within a socialist political regime and considers the activities of employers and labour unions with regard to these women. The study opts for in-depth gender knowledge derived from the positions of women workers and their social security needs. It examines how the social security needs have been understood, conceptualized, and articulated. And it argues for the creation of a wider space for the development and dissemination of gender knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Rapid socioeconomic and political changes have to a great extent increased the vulnerability of the poor and members of marginalised communities, who are largely being excluded from advantageous work participation. On one hand, the informal economy with its flexible rules is creating opportunities for poor unskilled women who are denied access to formal sector work; on the other hand, this has been identified as a feminization of labour forces with emphasis on the degrading nature of women's work (Jain, 2005), with no job security, no social protection, and only a minimum wage. Social biases affecting the choices and preferences of employers, social constraints, and obligatory domestic responsibilities are the major reasons for women's concentration in lower paid, unskilled work, and this has seriously affected families with single women earners (Greenwood, 1999; Jain, 2005; Jhabvala, 1985; Krishnaraj, 1992).

The study examines West Bengal during its socialist period, exploring how the socialist regime has understood the gender dimensions of poverty. It looks at the nature of informalisation within the socialist period and asks why the socialist ideology did not pay attention to the social security needs of the female informal workers and their representation in labour unions.

In this article, the problems of social security have been studied from the perspective of negotiation and space creation. The emphasis is on exploring gender knowledge within diverse, conflicting situations and identities. Cavaghan (2010) borrowed the concept of gender knowledge from Andresen and Dolling (2005). Andresen and Dolling introduced the term for its utility in exploring various dimensions and categories of gender knowledge. Cavaghan (2010) went on to further discuss the utility of the concept, exploring its potential for research on implementation problems in gender equality policies.

Thus, the gender knowledge framework was introduced to identify the explicit and implicit assumptions and conceptions concerning gender and gender relations. The analysis here shows that we are not just facing a gap in ideation and implementation; more than that, the assumptions and conceptions encourage specific kinds of knowledge categories with little flexibility to deal with contextual reality (Cavaghan 2010).

The article has adopted the gender knowledge framework to explain why the socialist ideology refused to recognize women workers as gendered workers, and how this process became selective and increasingly complex.

Critics of the socialist regime in West Bengal are of the opinion that the Communist party of India (CPI) and later the Communist party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), formed in 1977, have worked substantially for land reform and legal recognition of sharecroppers (who till the land but do not own it), and have been in favour of the labour laws, workplace rights, and the activities of trade unions. However, the CPI(M) lost its popularity and experienced a major failure in its later period, during 2008, when it suffered a humiliating defeat on the grounds of land acquisition under the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) policy and also the Maoist uprising in its interior region posed a big question against the government's ideology for justice (Rise and fall of the Left in West Bengal, 2011). One major criticism of the CPI(M) party in West Bengal was that the impact of labour laws and regulations was limited among the higher caste men, from middle or upper middle class families. But apart from few feminist writings, the exclusion of women during the socialist period has mostly been ignored.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The textile industry in Bengal is an important industry with an enormous number of women workers, the majority of whom are informal and nonregistered workers, and many of whom are home based, while others are working informally within the formal sector. Increasing competition, change in taste and preferences,

and the global value chain are pushing even formal sector workers toward informal work relations. India officially liberalised its economy in 1990, then from 1995 onwards the government-run textile mills had greatly reduced the recruitment of permanent registered workers, and by 2009-2010, when the interviews were conducted in West Bengal, the government-run textile mills had totally stopped the recruitment of any kind of registered workers, whether permanent or casual.

If we analyse West Bengal from a historical perspective, we see that government policy has been in favour of welfare for workers, but hardly any efforts have been made to include informal labour within the welfare schemes. Even within the organized sector, due to the increased rate of competition, the percentage of permanent workers is decreasing at a rapid rate. The workers who are actually getting welfare benefits within the formal sector are very few in comparison to the huge number of workers who are working informally within the factories of the formal sector and in the home and cottage industry. Due to strong competition and large-scale poverty, even many of those workers in the formal sector who are eligible for welfare schemes cannot access them for various reasons.

The informal sector of the textile and clothing industries is concentrated especially in areas with a large number of people who are living below the poverty line and do not have any other means of earning a living. They do not have land. Women especially try to earn more to support their families.

Despite a long history and tradition, the textiles sector in West Bengal continues to remain embedded largely in family driven, micro and small-scale operations with structural distortions and large gaps in the value chain. A lack of investment, deficiencies in infrastructure, technological backwardness, low volumes of operation, and disconnection from the large emerging markets within and outside the country have contributed to the industry's remaining only a source of subsistence for most of its stakeholders.

Trade Unions in Bengal

Trade unionism was a concept that was largely unknown to the Indian citizen before 1918, but unions gradually arose after this time in India. The first major strike broke out in Bengal in 1920; before that there were a few isolated strikes, which were mostly noneconomic in character. Between 1921 and 30 June 1929, there were 201 recorded strikes in the jute industry. The most notable feature of these strikes was their magnitude. The trade depression, reduction in wages, and appalling living conditions were the initial causes of militancy (Chakraborty 2000). Later causes also included changed industrial policies that led to a lengthening of the working week and a decrease in weekly earnings. About 60,000 workers were laid off in 1930-1931. The decline in the bargaining position of the working class in these years is reflected in the stagnant money-wage figures in the industry. However, the harsh reality was not only that the majority of the workers

had not been unionized; an even greater problem was that the trade unions were apparently inherently unstable (Chakraborty 2000).

Overall, in Bengal the condition of women's participation were even worse, and with the trade liberalization from 1990s the women's position in the organized sector, such as jute and cotton, has further been threatened, primarily because of employers' unwillingness to provide maternity benefits, ban night shift work for women, and the problems associated with the child care facilities. More recently, even though the 30 year period of Communist rule saw an enormous increase in women's participation in trade unions, the number of women organisers and leaders in unions has remained negligible (Bagchi, 2005).

A BROADER FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON INFORMAL WORK AND POVERTY

The patriarchal definition of the division of labour and the assumptions of Marxist feminists on this topic may not be enough to explain the forms of patriarchy. The impact of patriarchy depends not only on culture but also on other major economic and social factors, and this leads to disagreement among the diverse feminist thinkers regarding the ways of emancipation.

Moreover, overreliance on assumptions regarding patriarchal exploitation may haunt other forms of exploitation in the globalised world. As explained by Porpora, Hui Lim, and Prommas (1989), in the case of Thailand, the preference for female labour does not always reflect a conscious strategy to secure docile workers; instead they are preferred because the type of work for which women are recruited has historically been performed by them. These authors have shown that women from Thailand are well organised and assertive in defending their rights, and that their family structures in general are not exploitative and do not force them into this kind of work: it is their independent choice. So this is not a case of patriarchal exploitation. Instead, Porpora et al. (1989) emphasized the exploitation caused by the international capitalist relations of production, for which women from the developing countries are paying a heavy price. Studies conducted among the women workers in textile and related industries have shown that women workers in different phases of history have been utilized differently, and the different forms of utilization and exploitation are determined by a complex network of linkages and relationships (Kabeer, 1994; Mosley, 2008; Shahra, 2007), not only by patriarchy.

Marilyn Carr and Martha Chen (2004) are among those who are working to help informal women workers. They have comprehended the major problems and extended the understanding of the informal workforce in developing nations: it should not be seen merely as an issue of unemployment. Instead, their emphasis is on the need to understand the prevailing nature of employment opportunities and the process of inclusion and exclusion of the working poor. Previously, informalisation used to be conceptualised as relating to workers who are avoiding the

formality of registration and taxation, but a gradual increase in the in-depth understanding of the problem has laid more emphasis on exclusionary perspectives, where formal sector rules and regulations procedurally exclude workers from non-wage benefits (Carr & Chen, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the study is qualitative. It has explored a single textile mill, the Kalyani Textile Mill, as it is a government-subsidized mill, established during the partition of Bengal in 1947, with the intention of providing work security for poor, marginalized, migrant women for their economic and social upliftment. The research is presented in case study form. The findings of the study focus on various inner dimensions of power and the changing work patterns and process of exclusion from social security provisions.

Within the mill, 80 women were interviewed in depth using a semi-structured questionnaire, and from these interviews 10 were selected for the purpose of building case studies. These interviews were purposefully selected to capture various perspectives. During the research, all the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. From the 80 interviews and the chosen individual cases, the research has derived themes and thereby developed a thematic analysis.

The data were collected during the year 2009–2010, an important historic moment in West Bengal, when the people, after 30 years of socialist rule, chose not to elect a socialist government any more. It was a remarkable period of political transition. In this historical context, the study aimed to capture the conditions of women workers, to find out to what extent the socialist regime had been successful in protecting their rights, and if the regime had not protected them, what were the reasons for this failure from the perspective of labour rights and in the context of the rapid informalisation of labour.

PROFILE OF THE TEXTILE WORKERS

The textile industry in Kolkata was chosen because historically it has employed a large number of women workers. Traditionally, this industry has involved large concentrations of women and children, but with the changing times and economy, there has been a change in job patterns, with more women working informally, whether they are working within the formal sector (that is, in the factory) or based at home. To better study the changing nature of the workforce and its relationship with major institutions, the study incorporates three types of women workers, permanent, casual, and daily wage (called “outside”) workers, in accordance with the practical divisions of the mill:

- Permanent workers are those who have a direct employee-employer relationship and are legitimately able to receive all the social security benefits that are

available to workers. The present study specifically focuses on a few major social security benefits.

- Casual workers are those who enjoy most of the privileges of permanent workers but are not permanent—they expect to get a permanent position once there is a vacancy. They can avail themselves of Employees' State Insurance (ESI) and maternity benefits. In comparison to that of the permanent workers, the basic pay of the casual workers is less, and a few opportunities, like that of obtaining quarters within the factory premises, are generally not available to them.
- Daily wage (“outside”) workers are those who work on a daily basis, receiving 80 rupees per day. There is no concept of leave; they are hired on a “no work, no pay” basis. They are unregistered, and the management does not maintain any records on them. Management recruits these workers on the basis of its daily requirements. Generally, every day many people wait outside the gate and management, on the basis of the requirements, calls them in. As outside workers, generally management prefers males, but as there is a crisis in the supply of male workers, female workers are recruited to fill these gaps.

Whatever their working status, all of these workers are part of the organised, or formal, sector, in that their workplace is different from their home. Employer/employee relationships can be identified.

Within the mill, women mostly work in the finishing department of the textile mill, while a very few work in another department. Initially, I interacted with the women in charge, and they found out who was free or willing to be interviewed. After conducting a few initial interviews with people identified in this way, I began to walk around the department and stand beside women who were working, and if they were ready to talk I conducted on-the-spot interviews in their workplace. But mostly I conducted the interviews during their lunch break or in the morning when they had just arrived at work. In the case of those women who were really poor and did not want to lose a single moment, I interviewed them while they were doing their work. As the women were required to work quite fast and had a daily production target to meet, accessing women during their peak work time was a problem. And of course, management did not want to spare the workers for a long time.

In the finishing department, women are mostly required to fill the reels of cotton. They have a definite target of 240 reels a month; any reels over 240 are counted as extra and lead to a higher wage. However, for most of the women completing the minimum target requires constant hard work.

Some demographic details will help to provide a basic understanding of the nature of poverty and the disparity between different types of workers. In all, 16.25% of the respondents are within the 15–25 age group, 35% are 25–35, 16.25% are 35–45, and 32.5% are 45 years and above. Only the older workers have had the chance of achieving a permanent post; all newcomers are recruited only as casual and outside workers.

The data show that 70% of the respondents have been educated up to lower secondary level, 12.5% have been educated up to primary level, and 11.25% have finished secondary education. The majority of the respondents have completed their lower secondary education and dropped out in higher secondary school. Even more striking is that among them, 5% are university graduates.

In total, 46.25% of the respondents are within the family income range of Rs. 1000–5000 per month; 42.5% fall within the 5000–10,000 rupee range; and only 11.25% fall within the range of 10,000 rupees and above. If we compare the different groups of workers, we find that 8.75% of the permanent workers are from the highest family income range mentioned above, 25% of the permanent workers and 15% of the casual workers are from the middle family income range (5000–10,000 rupees), and only 3.75% of the permanent workers are from the lowest of the income ranges mentioned above, whereas 22.5% of the outside workers and 15% of the casual workers are from this family income range.

Focusing on individual earnings shows that 66.25% of the respondents earn 3000 rupees and below, 26% of the respondents earn 3000–5000, and only one person said that she earns 5,000 and above, because along with her mill activity she also takes part in two other businesses.

The earnings of the permanent workers are slightly higher than the earnings of the other groups, as their basic pay is slightly higher. However, one permanent worker says that, though now she does not earn a bad wage, there was a time, when her children were small and the financial requirements of the family were higher, at which her income was lower and she was often required to take leave due to child care activities and for physical reasons. That was a critical phase of her life and she had to struggle a lot, but now the situation has changed. Again, there are women whose children are now grown up but do not earn enough or are not sufficiently responsible to contribute significantly to the family's income. One such case is that of a permanent worker in her last years of work. Her daughter married into a rich family, but the in-laws do not allow her to visit her mother or help her financially. Her only son is married and living in a separate dwelling with his wife. As the earnings of her son and daughter-in-law are low, they can hardly help her financially. She lives alone, does everything by herself, and if possible tries to financially help her son and daughter-in-law.

DISCUSSION

The factory has had a strong labour union affiliated with CITU (Center of Indian Trade Unions) with a strong hold over the process of recruitment and promotion, but has broadly failed to incorporate the issues relating to informal and women work. From the interviews, it became clear that increased global competition has inevitably reduced the impact of government subsidies; as a result even the formal registered workers are in constant threat. Thereby, for poor women the informal work contracts have become essential for existence, and for management the

recruitment of informal labour is considered necessary to meet the global challenges.

Raising the problem of the informal workers is a challenge, primarily because they are acutely in need of their jobs and are often not able to speak against the structural hierarchies. Indeed, for the women of all the different groups, the reason for working in the factory is acute financial necessity, and this does not allow them an opportunity to organize. The data shows that unionisation is the problem of the day, as the present crisis is creating more divisions in the patterns of work relations, with diverse kinds of threats and motivations. Formal sector unions, which have otherwise been strong and effective, have to a very large extent failed to include the informal workers. The findings of the present study will be discussed below.

Social Security Needs and Experiences of Empowerment and Disempowerment in the Context of Bengal

The analytical framework of gender knowledge is expected to capture a more nuanced understanding of the multiple identities of women and their social security needs. The study has incorporated three types of women workers in order to enhance our understanding of the changing patterns of labour relations and identity. This will help us in understanding the concept of labour protections within the changing work relations.

The idea of empowerment is not a simple issue of law or the opportunity to obtain work. Empowerment has a wider social aspect, including the satisfaction of the need for security. The text below discusses the social security provision for women workers, and how far it meets their needs. Then, utilising the women's perspective, it explores the reasons why women join the labour force and women's dual role, as these themes help to reveal both their needs and the extent of their empowerment or disempowerment. They help to define the nature of their vulnerabilities and their capacity or lack of capacity for negotiation. The attitudes of employers and the attitudes and activities of labour unions, both of which are major contributors to women's social security deficiencies and disempowerment, are also discussed.

Social Security: Needs and Provision

It is expected that the state with its legislature can influence the negative impact of open market mechanisms, and thereby to a great extent can restore the labour rights. Moreover, it has been argued, that, where collective labour rights have traditionally been well protected, their legal foundations will be difficult to change. But where a government has tended to repress labour rights, it is difficult to create legal guarantees of those rights (Mosley, 2008).

The present study enquired about workers' knowledge regarding social security. The majority of the organised sector women workers come to know about social

security only after joining the workforce, from work contracts, from coworkers, and from union meetings. A few have previous knowledge from close relatives.

Among the social security provisions, health care provision seems to be the most important, as women are required to perform diverse types of work in society and are prone to suffer from work-related diseases. One ergonomic study conducted by Metgud et al. (2008) in the Indian context, among 350 women textile workers in 2005–2006, showed that almost 91% of the respondents suffered from work-related muscular-skeletal pain in relation to the length of their occupational exposure. Along with this, a weakened handgrip, muscular fatigue, and respiratory diseases are common. The findings of the present study confirm the impact of bad health: all of the older women complain about knee and back pain as they need to stand throughout the day while they work within the factory and in the house. The result in the long term is serious health problems. Though all the formal and informal workers are equally exposed to these health risks, only the registered workers are eligible to avail themselves of ESI (Employees' State Insurance) benefits. In reality, this is often not practicable because of the complex administrative procedures involved, the problem of taking leave, and the need to travel long distances to the ESI hospitals while immediately after working hours they need to rush back home. In addition, the health center doctors are not available most of the time; the women have to buy medicine from outside, and some report experiences with corrupt doctors who demand money for issuing medical leave certificates.

Overall, the case studies produced by this research provide a broader idea of the nature of the social security provisions. A permanent worker relates that she got maternity leave and she needed one month's extra leave because of various complications, which she took from her ESI benefits. Even after her return to work, due to her bad health she performed only light work for 15 days, and because of her high blood sugar level she often became ill and in the workplace she regularly needed to take insulin on her own. Though she gets health care, her major health problems like neck pain, severe back pain, and high blood sugar levels are becoming intensified due to the nature of her work. However, she negotiates with the management and union members, as she used to be an active union member and her father was also an active union member.

When specifically asked why they do not raise these health issues, specifically those arising during pregnancy, in union meetings or before management, women of both permanent and casual working status state that as there is no legal foundation for it, there is no use in claiming extra provisions; they cannot even claim the crèche and breast feeding facilities as they know it is impossible to provide these in the present situation.

Another experience of pregnancy and child care seems to be important here. Though the woman who shared the experience got three months' paid maternity leave, working during her pregnancy was a problem, as she suffered from breathing trouble. Since her pregnancy, she has suffered from severe breast pain. Also,

due to the fact that she works long hours with heavy machines, the problem sometimes intensifies. Normally on those days, she tries to adjust to the situation, but only when the pain becomes unbearable does she ask for light work.

Thus, in these days of rapid informalisation of the workforce, when even the provisions for the permanent workers are rapidly diminishing, the extent of social security at present available is limited. The present study reveals that, overall, the organised sector women workers hardly get any other benefits apart from the three-month maternity leave. Though, at the beginning, crèche facilities were available, due to the adverse competitive situation all these facilities have been closed.

Along with the ESI, important provisions like the Provident Fund (PF) and pensions also exist. But the complex procedures and the hierarchical administrative structures have made these difficult to access. For example, the concerns of one permanent worker, who is about to retire, regarding her pension benefits are genuine and complex: she is a single woman with no financial backup, and she does not have much in the way of personal savings, as she has had to meet the family financial requirements alone, and now her pension provision is in doubt on the ground that the company is suffering from severe losses and regularly clashing with the Provident Fund and other government financial departments. Thus, providing social security benefits even to the organised sector workers is becoming more and more complicated.

Reasons for Joining the Labour Force

Women workers join the labour force either due to an acute situation of crisis during a particular phase of life like becoming a widow or due to the normal poverty-related reasons. They are mostly unskilled workers when they join the labour force, learning the work from other workers within the factory. The majority of them are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and their work provides a major contribution to the family income.

To a large extent, women's participation in the workforce depends on family needs, demands, and financial requirements. The majority of the women started working after the death of either their father or their husband, at a time of crisis when they had become the sole earner in the family.

For example, one respondent shares her experience of how after the death of her father she joined the labour force and made every effort to earn as much as possible: she enabled her sister to continue in education and also financed her marriage. But now the situation has changed: she is married, and her sister looks after her mother. Her husband and in-laws are quite well off, so now, as the crisis period is over, her work to a large extent has become voluntary. She is continuing in her job because she appreciates the security and she does not want to lose the permanent income. She feels, however, that her primary duty is to her child, and she never compromises the welfare of her son: whenever it is necessary, she takes leave. Thus, the reasons for

being in the labour force not only vary between individuals but also vary for the same individuals in the different phases of their lives.

Dual Role

There is no distinction between women of different work statuses in terms of their reproductive and child care responsibilities. Every day, they work long hours both in the household and in paid work activity. Due to these long hours of strenuous activities, they frequently become ill, suffering from long-term problems in their legs and pain in the lower portion of their bodies. Women have their compulsory household responsibilities. They differ from one another in their work schedule, work pattern, family financial position, and so on, but the dual role is common to all of them. The women in the study describe how they need to work from early morning to late in the night every day. They wake up by 4:30 in the morning, do all the required household tasks, then by 5:30 go out to work. They come back by 2:30, and immediately start to do child-related work. One respondent explained that she used to work extra time regularly, but now she is unable to manage as her physique does not permit it. Even after going back home, she hardly gets any rest. Her work continues up to 11 o'clock at night, as the family is quite large and the pressure of work in the house is heavy, but she cannot say no, as the household work is essential. The same woman mentioned her adopted child (a girl who is mentally challenged), whom she is required to look after along with her own children.

From the cases discussed, it becomes clear that household and child care activities do not leave much time for other work. Women factory workers often need to take leave and often cannot do extra time because of household needs. Due to the pressure of the dual role, they frequently fall sick. The problem of the dual role becomes even more prominent in the days of pregnancy and early child care.

All this is reflected in Singh & Hoge's (2010) findings, which emphasize that the macro variables of religion, caste, and class are not enough to explain the nature and extent of women's affiliation to work; there is a need to identify the right research questions to address the structural inequalities and their outcomes affecting working women's well-being.

Reasons for Preferring Male Workers

The liberalised global economy has threatened global labour security, and it has provided more opportunities for ignoring the labour laws and also for exploiting the poor and marginalised workers within the less developed nations. The idea of the feminisation of labour and the larger numbers of women entering unskilled work requires fuller and more thorough discussion, as the findings of the present study show that within the factory in which the interviewees work, the labour officers and the union members still at the present day prefer male workers to

female workers; though many women workers are working there, it became obvious that women workers are not very welcome.

Social reality is a changing phenomenon and the study has tried to capture the changing relations from diverse interpretations of individuals' relations, the dominant ideology, and global/local competition. These relations do not affect only individuals; their impact on the thinking of groups of individuals and organisations is worth studying. The Kalyani Textile Mill was founded with the idea of providing security for the poor, underprivileged women who migrated during the time of the partition of Bengal in 1947, but gradually, increased global competition and the unequal development of rural and urban areas have caused extreme scarcity of resources and fewer work opportunities in the area, and as a result the wealth that was intended for the welfare of poor women workers has actually been appropriated by male workers and women workers from higher social classes.

Clearly, there are biases in favour of male workers, as will be demonstrated throughout this section. The labour welfare officer provides one perspective:

Now competition has increased, government will not continue with the same amount of subsidy; the minimum profit have to be earned and the factory will be required to be more production oriented, and in terms of production the working capacity of the male workers is much higher than that of the women workers. According to them, women workers cannot work for a long time at a heavy machine, women cannot work in night shifts whereas a man can work in all the three shifts. Often men workers get annoyed if they do not get work in all the three shifts.

Management stresses that security is a major issue inside the mill, and that providing security for the women workers is really difficult. In the opinion of management, the cost effectiveness of male workers is one of the main reasons for the bias in the males' favour. For the women workers, safety measures have to be maintained, the company has to bear maternity costs, and most important, women cannot work in the night and are not suitable for every type of work. However, management has also mentioned that in comparison to male workers, female workers are more disciplined, their concentration is better, and they are more regular in attendance, which is why management is forced to recruit them.

Certainly, management harbours cultural biases against women. Moreover, because factory work is gradually becoming more informal in nature, with pay of only 80 rupees per day and no social security benefits for the outside workers, it is not at all lucrative for male workers, which is reflected in male workers' casual and careless attitude toward work, in their absenteeism and alcoholism. Because of the labour crisis caused by males' attitude to the work, management has to depend on women workers who are more regular, sincere, and attentive. Thus, attitudes toward women workers are a complex phenomenon. On one hand we see the

cultural biases against women's paid factory work, which seem to be further intensified with the existing protective laws; but on the other hand, the process of globalization has further intensified competition and led to lower wages and reduced facilities, which results in women workers being concentrated in this kind of work, because they are more reliable than men. But even then, because there is no better work opportunity for the male workers in the area, the percentage of male workers remains much higher than that of females. This is reflected in statistics showing the male to female ratio in the textile industry of India (see Table 1).

Broadly, the discourse of gender divisions of labour has continued with the structural exclusions. But why are women workers experiencing more exclusion than men from formal work contracts?

The exclusion of women workers and the reasons for it have attracted varied interpretations. Nirmala Banerjee (1991) talked about widespread socially sanctioned prejudices regarding women's commitment to the labour market, about their capacity to manage complicated machinery, and about their ability to make quick decisions or undertake steady, regular work.

The same findings have been reflected in the present study: management and union leaders have openly rationalized the idea that women workers are not at all suitable for a technologically advanced department, where workers are required to handle heavy machines and also need to take quick decisions. This preference, which is highly cultural, for male workers, is so strong that recruitment policy even for outside workers openly prefers males. Similar findings have been reported by Renana Jhabvala (1985). Her study of the retrenchment of women workers from Ahmadabad textile mills found that the majority of the workers who had been displaced during 1935 to 1940 were women and this took place through a process of rationalization.

However, as discussed above, the present study found that though there is an open preference for male workers over female workers, recently the company has only been recruiting outside workers and these outside workers enjoy hardly any benefits. Male workers generally dislike this type of work and often quit work or in general take a very casual approach to the work. Management often does not get the number of male workers that it requires. To overcome these problems and to

Table 1. Percentages of Females in the Textile Industry

Year	Male	Female	Total	Female %
2004	398,778	89,366	448,144	18%
2005	396,974	95,734	492,708	19%
2006	417,212	113,239	530,451	21%
2007	292,318	20,307	312,625	6%
2008	236,083	15,152	251,235	6%

Source: Ministry of Labour and Employment (2012).

fill the gaps, management recruits female workers. Generally these female workers are from needy backgrounds, they work hard and even regularly work extra time and maintain good production levels, and by nature the women workers are thought to be submissive and thereby easy to handle.

This prevailing division of labour not only shapes the ideas of management and male union leaders; it also shapes the perceptions of the individual women. The general perception among the women workers is that problems will be there but they are required to manage them; and that flexibility in the work schedule is essential, but as organised sector workers they have to follow certain rules that are quite normal for them. As women workers, they believe that they will always have some type of problem, but there is no use making unnecessary demands. A permanent worker says that as a woman she cannot deny her family responsibility and due to the financial crisis cannot stop working, despite the problems she has to face as a result, but as there is no alternative, she has to adjust; it is not fair to keep on complaining. Though the respondent personally feels that she requires better leave and medical facilities, she feels that rather than making demands it is far better to negotiate around the situation; every woman has her own limitations, but to meet the target she has to work hard in the workplace, and to meet the family demands she has to work hard in the home also.

Thus, it can be said, that overall, the sexual division of labour and the process of rationalization are deeply ingrained; it is not enough to raise a challenge to the problem from outside; it has to be realized at the core in the hearts of the workers. Still, it is necessary to acknowledge that a conscious understanding of rights or knowledge about rights is not enough for people to claim a right: in a general factory meeting, as women prefer to solve their pregnancy and health related problems through informal discussion, because women workers are conscious about the negative economic consequences. Many women in interviews mention their limited skills, their level of education, and the limited availability of work in the area. Thus, the acceptance of broader patriarchal dominations (for these women) are not because these women had a notion of false consciousness, rather, it is a conscious compromise.

Labour Unions

The data show that West Bengal, in spite of its decades as a socialist state, has very largely failed to address the problem of informal women workers; though the women have participated in unions, the nature of the work opportunities and the benefits offered have gradually changed for the worse. The rapid informalisation has caused a major shift in the demands made of them and in the work relations.

The state has laid a foundation for labour unions and for labour welfare activities. But in reality, little has been done in the proper implementation of welfare schemes, laws, and labour union activities, mostly because of the hierarchical, party-based decision-making procedures. Leading members of labour unions

are concerned with only a few specific issues related to permanent workers and to some extent to casual workers. For outside workers, participation in a union is meaningless. Unions do nothing to influence the lives of daily wage earners.

Conflicting views exist regarding union activities. The active members feel the union is essential for collective bargaining. But this bargaining capacity to a large extent depends on the support of a particular party, on time devoted to party activity, and so on. Generally what happens is that union members maintain a hierarchy, and hiring and promotion largely depend on relations with this hierarchy. One casual worker who was interviewed said that union activity is biased and that union members who are party members often harass those who are not. This has created a bitter working environment. She further explained that union activity is totally party oriented, and that apart from party members, other union members rarely get the chance of promotion.

One woman respondent explained very clearly that the union is essential for collective bargaining, to obtain and keep one's job it is required to support the union. She said that women have various difficulties but it is difficult to discuss them all. She explained that they rarely discuss their pregnancy and child care related problems with male union members, and only in unbearable situations would they share them with the female heads of the union; even then, they can achieve little in the way of a permanent solution.

A more in-depth understanding of the relationship of women workers with the union is needed. It is important to understand the gender dimension of labour union participation. Women's political choices are strongly influenced by their father or husband's choices, and their understanding of social security social security benefits mostly comes from coworkers and union meetings. Never do they themselves participate in decision making; it always seems that decisions have already been made, and they can only follow the rules, with no exceptions allowed. There is no scope for their personal opinion.

Broadly, the close connection of the trade unions with a political party often compromises the unions' role in labour welfare. Party-oriented union activities introduce subjective biases and preferential politics. All the women workers recruited into the formal positions are there because of some connection with a political party. The concern of the union leaders with members' welfare is limited.

All this often leads to conflict, as reflected in one woman's narration:

Union members harass workers a lot, transfer workers from one department to another and this harassment is more for the outside daily workers. Suddenly shifting from one machine to another reduces their rate of production and daily wage.

Those women workers who have somehow or failed to get party recognition or have some conflicts with an important party are the worst sufferers.

Consider the story of another outside worker, who by nature was very introverted and hard working. From 1994, she was a full time worker. Every day she did extra time and on average she worked 26 days in a month. For the last 10 years, she has been working as an outside daily worker. From morning to night she works hard and never skips a minute, often taking no lunch break so as not to disrupt production, yet she has never received any favour from the leading party.

The experience of another interviewee is also worth mentioning here. This woman is unmarried and supports her brother's family as her brother cannot work. Initially she was scared to come and speak to me, but one lunch time she managed to talk. She said her experience is terrible: often she is harassed by the union members, even the women union members. Often she is the recipient of threats from the members, and they shift her from one place to another. Many women who came to the factory after her have been promoted, but she has never had the opportunity as she personally does not like the labour union activities. She said she cannot communicate easily even with the unit's women leaders. These leaders often misbehave, but as she is not very well educated and there is no other good work opportunity in the area it is not possible for her to quit the job. She is the only member of her family who is earning money, though her low wage does not even enable her to finance the education of her brother's son.

Another woman does not at all like the leading party's activities, but unfortunately her husband is an active party member, though not within the factory. At various times she needs to attend party meetings, but only to uphold her husband's honour. She said the CPI(M) government is actually not in favour of labour but is totally against labour welfare. It does not provide any space for people to speak, party members always maintain the hierarchy, and women like her, those who are lowly and outside workers, are harassed. She said, remarkably, that although her husband is a supporter of the CPI(M) government she is never afraid to speak the truth.

Overall, the crucial issue is that outside workers are working out of dire financial need, and all their time is spent in work. They often need to exceed the minimum target for production, both for their financial requirements and also to keep their jobs. These workers get no support from the existing union, and because of their financial needs, their enormous family commitments, and lack of opportunity they cannot form their own union.

It is not that the interviews did not bring out any positive experiences among the workers. Many permanent women workers relate that at their time of crisis they managed to get a job, mostly because of some personal contact with union members. Initially, they worked in unskilled cleaning jobs, then they were gradually promoted, and now they are older they are active union members. But in spite of their privileged positions, they do not get enough time for party activities. And they still feel highly uncomfortable with raising issues regarding pregnancy and child care in union meetings; instead, they try to find informal solutions (as they think there are lots of other important things in the meetings to discuss). We may

wonder why these women workers are silent, whether for gender-related reasons or because their first priority is simply struggling with poverty.

Networking with union members seems to be important in the recruitment process. One recently recruited woman whose father-in-law was an active union leader at the mill tells of the support she received from the union leaders during her recruitment. But in spite of this initial support, she does not have the time to attend union meetings, and union members are not concerned about her work status.

Thus, overall it can be said that women workers hardly have time to join in party and union activities. The privileges of a permanent job and its social security provisions remain confined to only a few; the data also show that the majority of members of the privileged group belong to a higher social class. The union, being a party union, has failed to achieve an unbiased stand and remains silent about the women's problems.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that the existence of legislation for work protection and the presence of an active labour union do not ensure justice and fair work deals. The emphasis should be on how the poor women can raise their voice or better negotiate for justice. Protective legislation does not provide scope for voice and negotiations. And protective measures, in the context of limited resources and increased competition, have paved the way for exclusions.

From the primary data and existing literature, it can be argued that in spite of the extensive existing literature on identity politics and alternative dimensions of gender, in practice, women's problems and issues have been approached within the protective framework. It is time to look for local alternative solutions to problems within the context of growing informalisation. In order to do this, we must achieve a better understanding of informalisation and the informal sector. As Hill (2010) mentioned, with reference to the writing of Portes and Walton (1981), it is essential to understand informalisation in terms of its changing constraints and opportunities; it is a complex phenomenon with the possibility of both pitfalls and opportunities in employment and economic growth. And the idea of the informal sector, according to Hill (2010), as a continuum is analytically superior to dualistic and structural models (Hill, 2010); this is supported by the data from the present study.

The state ideology of labour protection has largely failed, as it has promoted a redistributive and protective approach without considering the problems of identity politics and broader structural exclusion. Even the trade unions not only remain silent on women's issues and women leaders but also to a large extent follow the principles of exclusion. Within the unions, the dynamics of groups, leadership, and identification have paved the way for exclusions. Unions are strongly influenced by the male-dominated socialist politics of West Bengal, where the top leaders are mostly males of high social status and political party structure remains insensitive to gender issues. A better understanding of the

informal sector, further knowledge of women's needs, and a rethinking of gender-related assumptions will be needed before women can achieve social security and justice in the workplace.

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Direct reprint requests to:

Sohini Basu
Tata Institute of Social Science
V.N. Purav Marg
Deonar, Mumbai 400088, India
e-mail: sohini.mimi2008@gmail.com