

RECOGNISING THE 'COMPULSORY' WOMAN WORKER

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

Women working at a MGNREGA project site in Hubballi taluk in Karnataka. | Photo Credit: KIRAN BAKALE

The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) reported that the labour participation rate of rural women was 9.92% in March 2022 compared to 67.24% for men. This is a cause for concern. According to CMIE, millions who left the labour market stopped looking for employment “possibly [because they were] too disappointed with their failure to get a job and under the belief that there were no jobs available”. In countries like the U.S., Canada and Australia, such workers who are willing to work but give up searching for work for various reasons are called ‘discouraged workers’ and they are included in the unemployed category. This phenomenon, not captured in India by any official labour force surveys, is wrongly described as women “dropping out” or “leaving the labour market” giving the impression that this was a choice made by them, whereas, actually, women are pushed out of employment. The CMIE provides valuable inputs for urgently required government intervention in rural India.

Ground-level realities are worse than what the CMIE suggests and what the government denies. Women who belong to landless households or with meagre landholdings cannot afford the luxury of being “discouraged.” These are the “compulsory” workers.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) sites are probably the best places to understand the compulsions of millions of women to work. One particular project in Kalaburagi district focuses on creating more than 200 percolation ponds, which are designed to address the declining levels of ground water and to help recharge wells. This project provides a few workdays to an estimated 300 workers from four villages. The soil is hard and dry and the project stretches over several kilometres. The women, who outnumber the men, work in women-only pairs. They dig and lift the mud. In the searing heat, they have to dig a 10X10X1 tank in a day. An assistant to the officer-in-charge estimated that because the soil is hard and stony, this would mean digging and lifting about 3,000 kg of mud a day. Since most of these women are unable to complete this task, they do not get the piece rate of 309; they get only 280 to 285. There was no crèche at the site. There was no water, so women took turns to walk a kilometre to a water source to fill their two-litre bottles. They said their limbs ached. Many said they felt dizzy.

But despite the difficult conditions, every worker on the site complained about getting only about 40 days of work in a year. They wanted more as they regard MGNREGA work as their savior. The fact that they want to do more of this punishing work reveals the depths of the distress of poor rural households.

During the agricultural season, all the women worked on the lands of others, earning around the same as on the MGNREGA site. But the mechanisation of agricultural operations has drastically decreased workdays to less than three months a year. Many women therefore become part-time construction workers. They are hired by a network of “mistries” working for contractors. They migrate to construction sites for a few months, with their families or with other women from the village. Not one of them I had met had registered as a construction worker. They were therefore ineligible for any legal benefits accruing to them from the Construction Workers’ Welfare Board. At a construction site, each of them carried a minimum of 1,000 bricks a day, weighing two kilos each, or other heavy construction material, often climbing to the first or second floor with this

load. They were being paid 300 a day, less than the men.

When manual or construction work is unavailable, the women find other work. Some of them make twig baskets and brooms. They walk from village to village, often 25 km a day, to sell the baskets. It takes two days to make 10 baskets for which they make 10 per basket. Some women provide services such as cleaning or do odd jobs for landholding families for an average of three or four days a month. Some do tailoring work. They also do their own housework. So, going by the anecdotal evidence of women at a MGNREGA site, an individual woman in the course of a year is a MGNREGA worker, an agricultural worker, a construction worker, a migrant worker, a self-employed street vendor, a tailor, an odd job domestic worker, and a home-maker doing multiple domestic chores.

The 'compulsory' woman worker's work never ends. Siddhama, a 45-year-old mother of four from Yadgiri district, stretched out her arms and said: "My arms that labour... this is the property I have, to earn money for my family to survive. When I work, they eat."

The high prices of essential commodities have led to a huge cut in women's consumption of vegetables and pulses. To prove their point, some of the women at the worksite brought out their lunch boxes, which contained rice or rotis and a chilli chutney. Two sisters, Sheelawati and Chandamma, said, "We drink water after having the chilli chutney. Then we don't feel hungry." Others nodded in agreement. They said that the 10 kg of grain per head from the Central and State governments' free foodgrains programme was of great help and were afraid it would end. The deprivation of nourishment that women face due to high prices and low incomes is another dimension of the 'compulsory' woman worker's life.

Almost every woman spoke of being trapped in debt. What the women earn from multiple tasks for which there are no fixed piece rates is in no way equal to the amount of labour they do. The dismantling of labour laws in urban areas has weakened labour departments. Implementation of minimum wage in rural India is conceivable only with strong movements of agricultural workers' unions. While there should be strict implementation of minimum wages with piece rates fixed for different types of women's labour, it is unfair that landless manual labourers in rural India are denied the pitiful government annual cash transfer of 6,000 given to land-owning farmers. While rural labourers should also be entitled to a similar cash transfer, the schedule of rates for women at MGNREGA projects based on impossibly high productivity rates must be lowered and the work sites made more worker-friendly.

With the deep penetration of capitalist processes in rural India, there is a crisis of livelihood options. Poor women adopt various strategies to deal with it. To make a correct analysis of this crisis requires a sensitive lens. The invisibility of women's work can be addressed through time use surveys. The village-level time use surveys done by the Foundation for Agrarian Studies, for instance, revealed the extent of women's work. In fact, widespread surveys of poor rural women and how they spend their time are an urgent necessity. The 'compulsory' woman worker must be recognised and protected by laws and policies that address her issues, while India celebrates the 75th year of Independence.

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