

Relationship between the urban poor and more privileged groups including those of employment, political participation and informal governance practices

The invisible workers of the city: Home Based Workers

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5 W and 1 H of home based workers

Home based workers is a category of workers operating from the confines of their homes or surroundings, highly invisible and not statically counted as worker population contributing to the GDP of a nation or alternatively subsidizing production. Home based work is a global phenomena and found in developed and developing countries both in urban and rural setups. Home based work represents a significant share of total employment in countries in Asia, and it represents larger share of women's than men's employment. Home based workers produce under sub contracts for both local and global value chain (Charr, Chen and Tate 2000). There are 2 basic categories of home based workers - self employed home based workers and sub contracted home based workers. The self employed home based workers take all the risks of production as well as marketing and sale. They buy their own raw material, supplies and equipment pay for utilities and transport, sell their own finished goods mainly to local customers and markets and sometimes to international markets too. Most self employed home based workers employ others in the family for the production, marketing and sale. Sub contracted home based workers (also called home workers) are contracted by an individual, often through an intermediary and are provided raw material and for their services are paid piece rate. They don't have the responsibility of selling finished goods. However they also cover many cost of production such as workplace, equipment and its maintenance, supplies, utilities and transport. Both categories are vulnerable and impacted by the vagaries of market. Both have to deal with uncertainty and delays in payments, unreliable supply of raw material, unsafe habitats and no or poor quality of infrastructure and rejected orders.

Since they are not covered statistically some dated estimates are available for India through analysis of Employment Unemployment Survey report of 68th Round of NSSO data. In India in 2011- 2012, home based workers comprised of over 15.2 % of the non agricultural workforce, 31.7% of women and 11% men were found to be working in non agricultural labour. In the last decades India has been near bottom of female work participation ratio globally. However some of the recent data are indicative of upward swing in the work participation rate in urban India. However, lower attainment of both education and skills have forced them to be a part of increasing unorganized sector. Many of these new entrants are either engaged in providing services or in home based work. (need to find reference)

Home based work is diverse, heterogeneous and labour intensive, ignored by labour surveys and therefore ignored by labour laws as well. Lack of any legal framework and recognition they are forced to operate independently. With 94% of the workforce being informal there is a third category of labour force that has emerged, the one that services and produced its own kind, meaning other

informal sector workers. After many years of operations few of them graduate to operate in local, national and international markets. This category of workers largely operating in a parallel economy largely unregulated though not insulated by the larger economy. They have well defined backward linkages with formal economy but have very intricate and complex and informal linkages with forward linkages hence increasing their risk and vulnerabilities many fold.

This paper shall focus on home based workers operating in this category where they largely produce goods and services for their own kind. The experience for this paper has been gathered in an attempt to organise home based working women in H east ward of the Mumbai Municipal Corporation in the slums of Behrampada, Dnayneshwar Nagar, Golibar and Bharat Nagar.

Interaction of these workers with the privileged groups for this paper shall be limited to 3 areas – services they provide and services provided to them, their political participation and therefore assertion of their rights.

Services they provide – Most of the home based workers operating in this area are engaged with the garment industry -tailoring or doing embellishment work on of garments, they also do thread cutting, stitching buttons and packaging. Most of the work given to them is through an intermediary or the entrepreneur himself operating from the same location / slum or a nearby slum. These garments are low quality, produced in bulk to be sold in a whole sale market located in a nearby slum locality of Navpada. The finished garment is sold on the roadside shops and on cartwheels at various locations in different markets in Mumbai. The temporary kiosks and spaces are located informally in the formal markets where cost of operation (infrastructural or otherwise) is minimized. Consumers of the garments produced by this category of HBW are their own kind. Most of the workers are women in the age group of 30 – 55 yrs old, with little educational qualification, have had children and are now school going and are settled with routine care responsibilities at home.

These women workers even after having direct contact with manufacturer or operate through an intermediary but find it difficult to negotiate piece rate for multiple reasons – a very large population of unemployed and underemployed workers who are willing to do the same job at the same or lower prices, no regularity of work and therefore need to take up multiple tasks so take up whatever they get at any given point of time. Interestingly since they as well as their know are a part of the consumers they know the selling they have no access to market to know the selling price and know that profit margins are low and thus not ask for higher prices.

Services from the city- They are the second class citizens of the city as they don't own land legally and common perception is that they have encroached on public spaces. Home Based workers are largely located in slums are considered as illegal encroachers on public land and creating pressure on civic amenities. Therefore there is a denial of civic amenities along with constant threat of eviction to their habitat as well as livelihood spaces. Now many of the slums in Mumbai do have civic amenities but these amenities are far scarce in the proportion of population using it. They have no connect with the privileged class of the city as they do not directly provide services and products to them.

Also the fact that they work from the confines of their homes and are not a part of the markets makes them invisible. Their demands and needs find no supporters in with the privileged of the city.

Political Participation – It is a well known fact that political participation of these category (slum dwellers) is quite high. Their political engagement stems from a strong belief that the elected leadership can bring about positive changes in their lives. Interestingly this category of workers engages politically as citizens and not as workers. There have been limited interventions with this population to collectivize and make them a politically assertive category of workers. The hurdles in collectivizing them are many, to find a common ground for collectivization is the biggest hurdle as the home based workers engage in a number of economically remunerative activities. However their voicelessness has been a big impediment to them being insulated to processes of evictions and slum redevelopment. Eviction and slum redevelopment have ignored to acknowledge the dual use of living space as work space.

In conclusion for them to make a shift from voiceless to be heard there is an immediate need to collectivize them as workers, it becomes all the more pertinent in times where labour reforms are bound to change. They are also likely to be the worst affected by the shift to a cashless economy since all dealing were in cash. There is also an urgent need to identify and recognize them as a contributing category of workers along with enumeration and demand for social security cover for all. Also advocating labour laws based on decent work principles and workers rights. There is an immediate need to re-imagine homes as living and working spaces, provisioning of common working spaces in case of redevelopment along with essential infrastructure services.