

### **Bringing Work Home: Women's Organization in Urban India**

The vast majority of urban workers in developing countries is informal and, increasingly, female. These workers face enormous work loads both inside and outside the home, and they receive little to no protection from the state or employers. What are these workers doing to help themselves under these conditions? This paper examines (1) how informally employed workers are organizing to improve their livelihoods, and (2) what impact the feminization of the informal labor force has on workers' organizational strategies and effectiveness. India provides an ideal location to examine these questions. Liberalization policies since 1991 have led to increased urbanization and the subsequent feminization of informal work; as well, nearly 60 years of democracy have created a vibrant civic and political activist life. The informal sector is defined as economic units, whose goods and services are legal, but whose operations are not registered or regulated by fiscal, labor, health, and tax laws. Thus the primary difference between informal and formal workers is that the latter are protected and regulated under state law while the former are not (Portes, Castells, and Benton 1989). Informal sector workers include the self-employed and contract workers, both of whom rely on insecure wages with no benefits.

Various case studies from around the world have shown that the growing group of informal workers are indeed trying to organize (Beneria and Roldan 1987; Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala 1996; Cross 1998; Grasmuck and Espinal 2000; Gugler 1991; Macharia 1997; Sharma and Antony 2001). Moreover, studies have shown that gender impacts organizational strategies among workers (Fernandes 1997; Fernandez-Kelly 1983). Such findings are especially important as the informal workforce in developing countries grows and becomes increasingly feminized (Standing 1999). However, surprisingly little is known about informal workers' specific organizing strategies, and even less is understood about the impact of gender on the effectiveness of their organizations. The literature on labor organization throughout the world has virtually ignored the informal sector as its dispersed, unregistered, and insecure nature of employment makes organization especially difficult. More recently, literature on women's movements

throughout the world has tended to deemphasize the role of all workers as an organizing axis. Insights into how informal workers organize and what role gender plays in the organization can have profound implications on our understanding of the changing nature of urban economies in the developing world.

Using a mixed methods approach, I analyze two sets of data. The first set is from a national-level sample survey on employment, and the second is from 140 in-depth interviews of organized women workers in the informal sector in three Indian cities. First, based on existing labor literature, I construct a measurable construct of work quality using the national-level data. I then examine the impact of trade union membership in the informal vs. formal sectors on work quality. Structural Equation Models (SEM) are used to create a composite, quantitative indicator of work quality at a national level. SEM techniques are ideal for using a set of observable indicators (such as income, regularity of work, benefits received) to measure a theoretical construct, such as work quality, that is not easily measured and is rife with measurement error. Unlike standard regressions, structural equation methods allow for measurement error. If the observable indicators are highly correlated, we can say with some confidence that they might be reflecting the effects of the same latent variable (Bollen 1989). I allow the errors of the indicators to correlate to test the use of work quality as a single, latent construct and ultimately measure and model the various indicators of work quality simultaneously. This analysis shows that informal sector workers' organizations have little impact on work quality, while formal sector workers' organizations have a significant impact.

I then use the data from the interviews with organized women workers to shed light on how they organize and how they define their success. This analysis shows that the feminization of the informal labor force has significantly altered workers' organizational strategies and effectiveness in the informal sector, as compared to the formal sector. First, because most women workers work at home and often use their children for additional help, they have shifted the focus of workers' demands toward increasing welfare benefits at home, such as health and education subsidies from the state, rather than securing work benefits, such as minimum wages and job security, from

employers. Second, because informal sector employers do not remain constant and most workers work at home, informal workers now organize around the neighborhood, rather than the shop floor. Despite a decrease in welfare spending during liberalization, these new strategies have led to significant state concessions.

It is intriguing that successful workers' organization may now be finding a new echo in, of all places, the feminized informal sector. In India, where labor organization is increasingly being viewed as a fading effort, women workers in the informal sector present a unique insight into new patterns of labor structures that are emerging in post-reform urban India.

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