

SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN SMALL-SCALE INDUSTRIES: A FOCUSED STUDY FROM INDORE, MADHYA PRADESH

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Abstract

This research paper discards the effect of the social security policies on empowerment of women in small scale industries (SSIs) at Indore, Madhya Pradesh. This paper identifies some of the main barriers that are blocking women's access to benefits including lack of awareness, non-compliance from employers and cultural barriers. These barriers are identified as part of a PhD study in the field. The results highlight the importance of combined interventions – such as awareness-raising initiatives at grassroots level, governmental regulations and involvement and support from local NGOs – to ensure policies are acted upon in the context of empowerment.

1. Introduction

Small-scale industries are crucial to the employment opportunities for millions of people in India, especially women. Women from lower socio-economic groups work in urban areas such as Indore in various sectors of the food processing industry, textiles industry and garment industry in SSIs. These jobs offer wages, but are not always stable or have guarantees of job security under formal labour legislation. These women are supposed to be supported by various measures taken by the government such as the Employees' State Insurance (ESI) Scheme, the Maternity Benefit Act, health and pension schemes, but that's not the case on the ground.

The issues faced by women at the workplace are different from that of men: they have less access to toilets, no child care, pay disparity, unsafe work environment, and have little bargaining power. This paper examines the issue of whether the current social security

programmes are indeed providing a concrete safeguard for these challenges or are they still out of reach. The goal is to share practical and applicable information about how policy – in conjunction with community support – can truly give women the power.

2. Conceptual Framework

Social security is the protection given to the workers to protect them from the economic hardships caused by their pregnancy, sickness, injury or unemployment. Empowerment, on the other hand, is synonymous to people's capacity to make strategic life choices, to gain access to resources and assert their rights, especially women. The nexus of these two concepts is of great importance when comprehending women's situation in SSIs.

Empowerment is seen from a structural perspective (policies) as well as an experiential perspective (life experiences). Women need to know what their rights are, to be comfortable asserting them and to believe that there will not be a backlash against them if they assert these rights. Social security provisions should, therefore, not be seen as merely protective but enabling, provided they are put in place properly. This paper puts the discussion in its broader context of gender equity in the informal industrial sector in India.

3. Methodology

The research is based on a bigger doctoral research done during July 2022 to October 2024 in Indore (Madhya Pradesh). A purposive sampling of 100 women, who are employed in registered and unregistered small scale industrial units was taken. The industries involved were textile finishing and tailoring, pickle-making and incense stick making.

Structured interviews were done with a pre tested interview schedule. Access to maternity leave: Qualitative response (perceived ability to speak up at work) was triangulated with Quantitative response (access to maternity leave). Part of the data has been presented here, and the remainder of material kept for future publications. Using this mixed approach helps to put numerical trends into perspective, in the context of daily experiences.

4. Key Findings

The results show that there are some gaps between the policy and practice:

Only 38% of the respondents knew about maternity benefits and only 21% had taken paid leave during their pregnancy.

A mere 47% of women knew about any health related scheme and 29% had used any support related to health.

60% experienced wage disparity, 12% talked about it or complained.

Legal literacy was not high, only 26% could be found to know about the law, such as ESI or Gratuity Act.

Personal stories were added to the meanings, such as, “I worked till the day of delivery, I didn't know you can leave,” said one participant. One added, “All we hear about these schemes is when someone is really sick. They are voices which highlight the disparity between employee rights and privileges and actual conditions.

5. Discussion

There is a systemic gap in implementation. There are a large number of informal and semi-formal SSIs in Indore. If not strictly enforced, employers will get away with it. The consequence is that, although women are policy covered workers, they are not in practice.

In addition, women are not empowered to claim their rights by the norms of society. Financial reliance on employment inhibits reporting and cultural, nonverbal attitudes of silence towards workplace mistreatment. Also, there is a pervasive lack of faith in grievance redressal system.

The need for the empowerment of social security is clearly apparent if it is to be truly empowering it is necessary that it be supported by interventions of the ground, such as Legal Literacy drives, peer-led education and direct interventions in industrial zones.

Conclusions and Policy recommendations:

While social security schemes have the potential to make a difference, this is only possible if they are accessible, understandable and enforceable for women labourers. Indian policy is progressive even though it is delivered in a fragmented manner.

Recommendations:

Identifying partners at the district level with the intention of initiating campaigns with them. Identifying labor departments & NGO partners at district level for initiation of campaigns.

Under the new regulations, employers will be required to undergo audits and be liable for penalties if they fail to comply.

In industrial areas, women's helplines are set up. In industrial areas women's helplines are established.

This capacity building of the SHGs is intended to sensitize the groups to identify violations.

Resilience, hard work and resourcefulness are the qualities that women in SSIs possess. They don't need to be taken care of, they need a fair chance. Awareness is the first step in empowerment and accountability is the driving force.

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