

NEED ASSESSMENT OF HOME BASED WOMEN WORKERS: A NEW PARADIGM FOR SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT: *The modern capitalistic development approach and decentralized production processes in global economy, with the major concentration of women in home based work, has emerged as a substantial aspect of informal economy. Despite of being major contributors in the national economy, home based women workers remain invisible due to under enumeration of informal economy, scarcity of statistical data and gender discrimination. This study adds up empirical data to the existing sparse knowledge and scarcity of research regarding the issues of home based women workers. This paper examines the socio-economic and cultural problems faced by women workers and also highlights how a social worker can play a pivotal role in resolving the problems and minimizing the risks of the home based women workers. Keeping in view the findings of the study, the social work implication is recommended as a more realistic approach to address and resolve the issues of home based women workers and emphasizes on its effectiveness to enhance the development potential of home based women workers at household as well as local economy level.*

Key Words: Gender discrimination, Home based women worker, Informal economy, Social work implication, Socio-cultural and economic problems.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization, with its modern capitalistic development approach, has resulted in subcontracting, production outsourcing and work force informalization [1,2,3]. The cost effective strategies, as a salient feature of global competition, has engaged human resources in unregistered un-incorporated enterprises, working as casual un-declared labourers, working on daily wages [4,5]. Increasing trend of informal economy, which comprises two third of the total work force, is evident in the developing countries, such as, 65% in South Asia and South East Asia and 60% in Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa [6] in comparison to developed countries which constitute 25% to 40% of total employment [7]. In South Asian region, the informal economy constitutes a large share of total work force employment like in India 72%, Nepal and Pakistan 73% and Bangladesh 62% (National Labour Force Surveys: Bangladesh 2002-03, Nepal 1998-99, India 1999-2000, Pakistan 2009-10). The increasing trend of informal economy as a result of the globalization and liberalization has become a prominent feature of developing countries [2]. The formerly conducted studies have presented a strong relationship between globalization, informalisation and feminization in context of developing countries [2,8]. The major contribution of poor, unemployed women's agency in informal economy is also evident in these studies. Likewise, a strong link between poverty, women and informal sector is evident in South Asian economies [5].

Due to growing globalization and decentralized production processes, with the major concentration of women, home based work has emerged as a substantial element of informal economy. The cost effective strategies on the part of manufacturers and global competition has resulted in worldwide increase in home based work. The economic constraints, socio-cultural normative patterns and lack of formal employment opportunities in developing countries have made the home based work more acceptable and

accessible option for women. The formerly conducted researches have indicated various factors, for both men and women, to involve in home based work, but in comparison to men, women being more unemployed, more illiterate and more poor are the major reasons due to which women opt for home based work [9].

Women constitute major part in home based work, indulged in numerous economic activities, ranging from conventional craft production (carpet weaving) to new economies (assembling electronics) [9]. These women can be a part of export based production process (electronics, knitwear, soccer industry) or the local market products (incense stick making, weaving). Home based women workers work within their homes or in neighbourhoods. Usually, they are paid on piece rate basis and get work from subcontractors or middlemen, or they can also be self-employed or own account workers.

In 1999, Human Rights Commission in Pakistan reported decrease in formal sector employment by less than 7% which resulted in an increase in subcontracted work by women to ensure their household survival. The Economic Survey of Pakistan 2011-12 depicted that 73.8% of Pakistan's total labour force is employed in the informal sector and formal sector employment has decreased from 26.7% (2008-09) to 26.2% (2010-11), showing an increasing trend of employment in the informal economy.

On one hand, as an evolutionary process, outsourcing to home based work has been considered as an affordable and cost effective way of production and getting the workers by the capitalist production process. On the other hand, home based women workers found this a convenient way of discharging dual responsibilities, that is, performing domestic responsibilities and doing economic activity simultaneously. This is also in line with the role expectations on family and community level resulting in less social threats which put their position on social risk [7][1]. In all the South Asian countries, the social aspects of home based work are just about same. Illiteracy, no formal training, low level of skill, social exclusion due to cultural restraints are some of the

main reasons due to which women turn to home based work [5].

The home based work gives several advantages to the employers. Firstly, according to the changing demand of the work, the hiring and firing of workers is easy. These women workers are always at the risk of losing their jobs. Resultantly, they do not have any bargaining power to put up their demands and negotiate the terms and conditions of work [1]. Secondly, risk of unionization is minimized as home based work is conducted in isolation, placing the workers at the risk of extreme exploitation with no resisting power. Thirdly, these women workers face entrepreneurial risks. The middlemen, contractors and employers do not have to pay the costs for the work space, utility bills and manufacturing costs like tools and equipments. These entrepreneurial costs, which are to be borne by the employer, become the sole responsibility of the home based workers [3].

The home based women workers become more susceptible due to poverty. Poor segments of the society, always striving for their survival, become risk averse [10]. Due to this home based women workers involve in low paid activities. The other dimensions like intergenerational poverty, non-unionization, invisibility, contractual and irregular type of work, low share in value chain and hazardous work settings [11] make home based women workers more susceptible to social problems and risks.

The research paper examines and analyses the main factors which push the home based women workers into various problems and social risks, such as poverty; a major reason of women's participation in home based work [5], low investment on social capital; socio-cultural perception about less returns in case of women resulting in low human development such as education and health [9], social exclusion; gendered work patterns and restricted mobility keep women in low paid economic activities [12,13,14], patriarchal system and gender division of labour, from local to global level, gender disparity places women out of gender mainstream [15].

Due to the non-availability of empirical data about home based workers, their invisibility and low statistics about informal economy, very few researches have been conducted on home based women workers. However, in available sparse literature, home based work has been discussed in context of social protection needs but none of the former researches has discussed problems and risks of home based women worker as a new paradigm for social work implication. Social worker, with its practical knowledge and professional approach, can devise concrete strategies to address the issues of home based women workers. The other aspect found in the literature depicts that due to non-availability of resources, lack of awareness and access and the complex delivery mechanism of available social provisions, the poor impoverished segments of the society cannot be benefitted from these interventions. Congruently, gender discrimination and social exclusion aggregate the situation. The development potential of home based women workers could be enhanced if their social risks are minimized.

This research paper examines socio-economic and cultural problems faced by home based women workers and highlights how a social worker can play a pivotal role in

resolving the problems and minimizing the risks faced by the home based women workers. The paper also proposes the social work implication as a more realistic approach to address and resolve the issues of home based women workers and emphasizes on its effectiveness to enhance the development potential of home based women workers at household as well as local economy level.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study population in this research was home based women workers and the quantitative data was collected from four different sectors of Province Punjab in Pakistan, i.e., Chunri Making from South Punjab, Soccer stitching from North Punjab, Garment sector and Carpet weaving from Central Punjab. Primary data was collected for this research. Keeping in view the heterogeneity of the phenomenon under study due to multiple interlinked and interdependent variables, in-depth interviews were conducted with 200 respondents, 50 from each sector, using a comprehensive structured interview schedule. The snowball purposive sampling method was used to select the sample for this study. The data instrument comprised more than two hundred questions to explore the socio-economic and cultural problems and risks of home based women workers. It took two to three hours to complete one interview. The gathered data was processed through SPSS.

RESULTS

In the present study, it was found that 71% of the respondents were living below the poverty line. The explicit link between poverty and home based work crops up from the fact that home based work is the only option available to these women workers in majority of the cases, as these women are forced to remain within the confines of their homes due to gendered work patterns and other socio-cultural restrictions. The lack of access market information, capital, opportunities of skill diversification, compelled seclusion and restricted mobility make home based women workers enormously vulnerable to the risk of poverty. 93% of the respondents were engaged in home based work due to poverty. The other responses were also indirectly related to poverty such as single support of the family, more expenditure due to extended family, inflation and loan payments.

The less investment on social capital was explicitly found in the study as 74% of the respondents were illiterate, while the remaining were mostly having education up to primary level. The situation was comparatively better in Garment industry being located in urban area.

Undoubtedly, 84% of the respondents expounded poverty as the main cause of being uneducated. The family restriction was the second major factor (39%) responsible for female illiteracy specifically in socio-cultural context of the country. 23% of the respondents were illiterate as no school was available in their vicinity. This finding also depicts the seriousness of the Government to improve the literacy rate in the country.

Due to gender discrimination and barred mobility, only 17% women workers were having access to the market. 67.5% of the home based women workers expounded family restriction as a major barrier to their mobility. The women workers consume most of their time in home based work in

addition to their domestic responsibilities along with reproductive role activities. The study findings also manifest lack of time, poor health and lack of transport were also the reasons for having no access to the market.

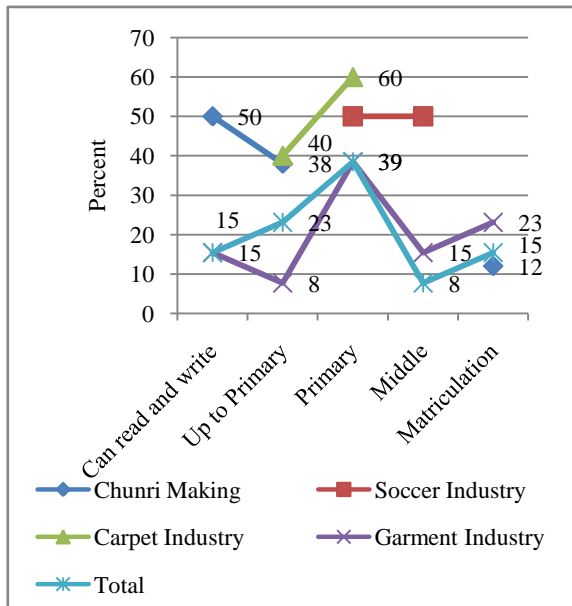


Figure 1: Level of education

72.5% of the respondents reported family disapproval as the major reason for their unwillingness to work outside their homes and 51.5% expounded that its their own will to work at home. Majority of the respondents (74%) were not willing to relocate the home based work from their homes. The different aspects like observance of ‘purdah’ (veil), restrictions on movement and gender discrimination compel the women to work within the confines of their homes. Simultaneously, the women also find it suitable to work at home as they can discharge the domestic responsibilities and take care of their children along with the home based work. The study also found that the most important needs regarding the home based economic activity were capital (26.5%), better wages (22.4%), regular work (17.3%), direct orders (11.2%) and direct access to the market (8.2%).

Table 1: Important need regarding home based work

Needs	Chunri Making	Soccer Sector	Carpet Sector	Garment Sector	Total
Capital	34.8	20	28	24	26.5
Latest equipment	4.3	4	12	8	7.1
Regular work	17.4	16	4	32	17.3
Better wages	17.4	16	32	24	22.4
Burning gas	13	.	.	.	3.1
Skill/Training	8.7	8	.	.	4.1
Direct orders	4.3	20	12	8	11.2
Access to market	.	16	12	4	8.2

Majority of home based women workers reported numerous health problems due to unhygienic working conditions, malnourishment due to poverty, long working hours, deplorable living conditions, poor sanitation and sewerage systems, poor lighting, heavy electricity load shedding and poorly ventilated small houses. 75% of the respondents reported joints and muscular pain due to long working hours in manual work. Other health issues expounded by the

respondents were weak eyesight, swelling, pain and back ache. In Carpet Sector, tuberculosis was found as wool was used as raw material. Constant movements in Chunri Making, Soccer and Carpet Industries were causing problem of shivering hand in the respondents. In the study, it was found that 20.4% women workers have to undergo abortion. Un-affordability of medicine (63.2%) and stress (21.2%) were the major reasons for the incidents of abortion. In Garment industry 8% of the respondents opted for abortion due to poverty. They did not want to have more feeding mouths.

A substantial variation was found in the data when the respondents were asked regarding their knowledge and awareness about different aspects like microfinance services, work related issues, cooperatives and unions working for their rights and legislative provisions. Extremely poor level of awareness and lack of information have placed these women workers at more susceptibility and exploitation. Their complete reliance on subcontractors and middlemen gives them an unbridled position to exploit the home based women workers.

Table 2: Awareness level of home based workers

Awareness about	S1	S2	S3	S4	Overall
Finished products are sold	64	-	32	60	39
Rates of raw material	84	-	4	40	32
Micro-credit schemes	-	60	20	40	30
Place of raw material purchase	56	-	20	40	29
Final price of these products	56	-	8	44	27
Any training institution	-	-	-	36	9
NGO working for their rights	-	16	12	4	8
Labor Laws	-	-	-	4	1
Legislation/policies about HBW	-	-	-	-	-
Union working for HBWs rights	-	-	-	-	-
Having registration/ membership	-	-	-	-	-

The place of sale of their finished products was known to 39% of the respondents only. Astoundingly, not even a single respondent in Soccer Industry knew where the finished products is sold. They only knew the middleman who takes finished products from them. An overwhelming majority of the respondents (99%) reported low wages as their most significant problem. Long working hours, long sittings and work stress were also expounded as major problems by 34%, 57.7% and 44.3% respondents respectively.

DISCUSSION

In less developed country, like Pakistan, where unstable political environment, unequal distribution of wealth, ‘boom and burst’ economic policies, injustice, inequalities and gender discrimination are responsible for the ineffective social functioning of society, there is a dire need for collaborated efforts between the social work practitioners and the policy makers to take initiative to bring welfare reforms in the whole structure of social institutions in the society.

The accelerated industrialization and urbanization has disturbed the self sufficient mechanisms to meet the challenges emerged due to socio-cultural, economic, environmental and political problems. The traditional approach of charity proved to be ineffective and inappropriate to deal with the evolving issues of the present

situation. Therefore, there is a need for an organized social welfare movement to manage and resolve these socio-cultural and economic problems. The social work practice is the professional service, with scientific body of knowledge and specific skill set and trained professional practitioners, which enables individuals, groups and communities to acquire personal and social independence and satisfaction [16].

In Pakistan, according to the Planning Commission, the social work profession has been held responsible in 6th Five-Years Plan (1983-1988) for providing welfare services like community welfare, women's welfare, labour welfare, staff welfare, social security, medical social work, welfare services for child, youth, aged, family, physically and mentally handicapped [17].

Social work professional service can be highly beneficial for the elimination of socio-economic and cultural problems of home based women workers. Social work practice as a helping activity can provide the support mechanism to minimize the risks, home based women workers are exposed to. Their vulnerable status to various risks also restrict them from obtaining a minimum standard of economic and social well being. Through providing assistance and guidance to the home based women workers to make best use of their individual potentials and to seek benefits from community resources, on the other hand, social work practice as a social activity can make best use of social institutions, both public and private, to extend its services for the welfare and the benefits of home based women workers. As a liaison activity, social work can bridge up the gap between the available welfare services and their outreach to the communities where the poor households of the home based women workers are concentrated.

Social work profession as a helping activity can be highly beneficial for the socio-economic and cultural problems due to which home based women workers become vulnerable to various risks. Social work practice along with its distinctive 'pro-poor cuisine' approach can play an important role in context of less privileged and neglected segment of women home based workers including:

- eradication of social injustice through making the existing social welfare services accessible to home based women workers.
- organizing awareness raising campaigns for the gradual change in the discriminatory cultural practices.
- taking certain steps to provide them relief through their inclusion in social legislative measures and community control process.
- spending on social capital to enhance their educational level, health status and recreational facilities.
- arranging training and interactive sessions for home based women workers to develop their skills and to make them familiar with the latest market trends and manufacturing techniques.

The strong belief of social work in people as the 'architects of progress' works as a guiding principle for the formulation of social policies to allocate the societal resources to enhance educational and health status, yielding fruits for future development. Furthermore, the foremost objective of social work practice is to provide social services in various fields such as women welfare, child protection, healthy

living environment, medical facilities and rehabilitation services, food supply and housing facilities which these women labourers need the most.

The sole objective of social work profession is to provide social uplift and social support to the weaker sections of society like home based women workers. Material welfare of the society is one of the significant objectives of the social work. The unequal distribution of wealth and scarcity of resources are responsible for the oppression, exploitation, gender discrimination, social injustice and crimes. The multifarious risks faced by home based women workers need the intervention and implication of social work.

The concepts, fields and services of social welfare need to be revised, redefined and should be in line with the emerging challenges of globalized economic scenario. A sound and solid, just and fair social policy, which directs socio-cultural course of action, and a comprehensive economic policy should be formulated with respect to women home based workers.

The present study opens a new avenue for social work research in the field of informal economy with respect to women home based workers. The poor conditions of women home based worker's communities prove that socio-economic planning is quite ineffective without proper social research. The social work research with its major focus on marginalized segments of the society will be a great source to enable the policy makers to formulate effective programs to solve the problems faced by this extreme poor, weak and most vulnerable segment of the society.

A professional social worker, trained with specific body of knowledge of social work and acquainted with welfare service delivery mechanisms, majorly concentrate on providing the solution of the conflicting and stressful situations which arise due to the maladjustments of people with the environment.

Social worker on one side as an information provider can render information to the home based women workers about the price of their manufactured goods, new market trends and latest technological advancements and production processes and about other groups of women labourers and their male counterparts working in the same craft. Social worker can provide the platform for collective action and making accessible the existing social welfare services and social safety networks. On the other side, a social worker can provide information to the public and other social institutions regarding the presence, characteristics and conditions of home based women workers.

Social work practitioner as a social mobilize can mobilize the home based women workers on community level, their inclusion in community decision making process and to enhance their awareness level about hygiene and other occupational safety measures and on the other hand awareness raising campaigns in public realm regarding their peculiar skills and valuable unique products and their actual role and contribution in production process of informal economy through organizing exhibitions in the market, seminars, discussions forums and media campaigns. As an agent of change, a social worker can play an important role for the empowerment of home based women workers. Social worker can arrange vocational training programs in collaboration with federal government organizations like National Vocational and Technical Education Council

(NAVTEC) or provincial government organizations such as Technical Education and Vocational Training Authority (TEVTA) or Punjab Vocational Training Council (PVTC). School social work and adult literacy programs can also be customized by the social workers for educating home based women workers and their children. Social worker can also play a role as an advocate for the gender mainstreaming of women workers and making such policies which should address their strategic needs in all development programs.

The access to the market and interest free microcredit, more and regular work, direct orders from the market and diversified income generating activities are some of the basic practical needs of home based women workers found in the present study. The social worker can play a pivotal role in providing more work orders, increasing their access to the market by counseling with their households and conferring between commercial market forces and home based women workers.

Being a community organizer, social worker can liaise and engage NGOs, local community citizen boards and local community based organizations to enhance the welfare of the women workers individually and to increase their cluster's development potential on the whole. The community based interventions can increase the self-confidence of these women workers against the middleman's exploitation and other peripheral issues and can strengthen the problem management capacity by utilizing these informal sources.

As a facilitator, social worker can provide a support for the skill enhancement of home based women workers through trainings and can provide them an opportunity to engage in diversified income generating economic activities.

Playing the role of a social activist, social worker can create and develop an environment to initiate changes in social structures and institutions to reduce gender disparities and social segregation which home based women workers extensively face. By organizing home based women workers for collective voice and action, social worker can help women workers to challenge the present power structure liable for their exploitation and oppression.

The informal sector mostly remains unrecognized. The social worker can organize and register home based women workers on individual or their craft basis so that this substantial segment of the population shall also be considered while making national policies.

Social workers can create a strong awareness regarding the different ways, levels and techniques of exploitation used by the intermediaries and can result in a rigorous discontentment about prevalent bad circumstances, which will eventually instigate them to organize. Social worker can facilitate the home based women workers to express their needs, help to specifically identify their problems and the sources of these problems and ultimately to improve their development potential to manage their risks effectively, optimally utilizing the available resources.

The different aspects of home based women working in the informal economy, like, the strong tendency and increased participation of women in informal economy (Sudarshan & Sinha, 2011), substantial relationship between the informal work engagement and poverty (Doane, 2007) and its deep rootedness in socio-cultural patterns of the society, resulting

in invisible status of home based women workers, open a new paradigm for social workers and social work profession. The situational analysis of the phenomenon under study, that is, the home based women workers; and the impact of home based work on women and especially children with major emphasis on girls, accentuate the need that home based work should also be looked from gender perspective as well. Their less spending on social capital for education, training and health, lack of access to available social protection services, the intensity of social risks they face and their capability to manage those problems, provides significant grounds to seek attention of social work practitioners and social policy makers.

The social workers have good prospects as they can play a very vital role to indirectly and directly impact the welfare of home based women workers. The multidisciplinary roles of social workers in community development and case work settings are predominantly significant in mapping and in recognition of home based women workers and in raising their development potential.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores the socio-cultural and economic problems of home based women workers and provides an opportunity to social workers to comprehend the behavioral patterns, milieu of socio-cultural norms, social practices and customs, taboos and beliefs which figure up the power structure and power dynamics in the society. It results in social mayhems and disorders, such as, social prohibitions and gender disparities as in case of home based women workers, which further lays the foundations for effective professional social work practice for the uplift of this less privileged segment of the population. As a result, multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral interaction of social work can play a pivotal and effective role in formulating practical and prolific policies and social welfare programs to cater the social and practical needs of home based women workers. The social work, with its pro-poor approach, contemplates on eradication of social upheavals and poverty from the society through optimum utilization of resources and by maximizing their outreach and ensuring the trickle-down effect to the susceptible and impoverished segments of the society, like home based women workers.

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