

Upheavals in infringing the formal-informal divide: Engaging gender in the Labour politics of Kerala,India

(SEWA Experience)

Debates on labour from the late 20th century have concentrated much on the informal economy and the large share of informal work force that contributes significantly to the global economy. The globalisation of the economy tends to reinforce the links between poverty, informality, inequality and gender. The informal economy is exacerbated as an exploitative space and also becoming a more critical sector for the growing poor.

Industrialisation of work led to more centralised production structures with visible work spaces and a formal coordination of employment relationship. The creation of modern capitalist – formal economies- made the jobs more formal thereby undermining all other forms of work. The dualistic compartmentalising of work into formal / informal, macro/ micro, urban/rural, production /reproduction have categorically excluded the latter from the socio economic estimations. Otherwise they are considered as subordinate units where cheap labour and resources are freely obtainable. This dominant formation of the workforce projected the male, manual, skilled, permanent worker as the representative of the workforce.

The globalisation of the economy contributed to a large scale informalisation of the workforce in many countries and industries. But these workers have been forced to work under the instructions of formal firms where they have to outsource their work for flexible production under informal arrangements. The workers who are retrenched from the formal sector are forced to be part of the informal workforce for their sustenance.

The informal economy is expanded so widely with new identities and new guises. It has the potential to rise up in unexpected locations which manoeuvres the growth process. But at the same time the micro existential strategies undergoes invisibility and exploitation with its precarious nature. The increasing involvement of women in the sector challenges the production mechanisms to address new patterns of work and service. These situations have led to the debate on 'Formalisation of the informal economy' which is receiving worldwide attention of policy makers.

In this context this paper is trying to narrate experiences of raising issues of gender in the labour politics of Kerala. In a state where the formalisation of labour process was well-designed with its organised nature and the systematic involvement in the workers' rights process, the worker identity has gained a positive momentum. The economic and political restructuring that occurred has placed the worker in an altitudinal position with a sustained employer-employee relationship. It is argued that there are certain stereotypic imageries that sustained the so called work spaces and the identity thereby created exposes the male nature of the workforce. Whoever wants to attain the official status of a worker has to go through this formation to get a union membership or to be eligible to be called 'thozhilali'(labourer).

Experiences with different rural and urban spaces have exposed the contribution of women to the survival of the family. Defining work in new form seems to be significant to assess their economic contribution. Their engagement is much explained in terms of social reproduction than a 'working class'. The so called statistical evidence of less women's participation in the work force reveals this invisibility of the women workers.

The performance of 'good governance' systems is through offering variety of welfare schemes to the beneficiaries. The notion of social status for receiving such benefits has sustained a 'housewife' image to a malayali woman. Becoming a worker breaches these conditions while it allows identifying as an entrepreneur.

There are many realities that go unnoticed in these attainments. Kerala is becoming a potential outsourcing location for multi brands and huge industries. Manufacturing and assembling of numerous products are dumped easily on these women without any resistance. Normally in a state where any sort of informal entry anticipates resistance, these huge industries easily manage their cheap manufacturing. The domesticity of women is not altered through the work and their labour brings an additional income to the family. Domestic work and other services women offer are also not in the purview of work as minimum wage notified for it is much less than the bare minimum wage of the so called formal workers.

Methodology of addressing these realities is explained in the context of a new form of organising in the state where the established trade unions still concentrate in the formal sector workforce. Incredible resistances are being experienced from the patriarchal conscience of the locations where women are not considered as workers.

Representations in the public forums of trade unions as women workers create a dilemma to the male crowd who are the real workers. With a different politics distorting the well-maintained male labour force raises issues of representation and also more contentious arguments to the infringing formal-informal divide.

Here organising strategies of SEWA(Self Employed Women's Association),which is the only women national trade union in India will be interlinked to substantiate the qualitative narrative of the worker.

Sonia George

Post Doctoral Researcher, Centre for Women Development Studies, Delhi

National Core Team Member and General Secretary, Kerala, SEWA,India

KRAD-51, Kuthiravattom Road, Kunnumpuram, Trivandrum-1, India

E-mail: soniageorgem@gmail.com

Ph:+919446551484

