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NEOLIBERAL URBANISATION, INFORMAL LABOUR AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN ODISHA

Abstract

Neoliberal urbanisation has led to a significant rise in the informalisation of labour within the city space. About 90% of India's labour force is employed in the informal sector, which dominates the country's economy. The International Labour Organisation reports that in comparison to men, more women are employed in this sector. This increasing involvement of women in the informal economy in the city space has generated a debate whether informal labour leads to women empowerment or impoverishment. While economists argue that informal labour has generated economic empowerment of women, feminists and political economists assert that it has created poverty trap leading to impoverishment. Based on this background, the article empirically examines how informal women labour in Bhubaneswar city leads to women empowerment. The data for the study were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected through conducting 90 interviews, 9 Case studies and few group discussions. The study revealed that women employed in the informal sector feel empowered due to their financial security and independence, active contributors of capital towards their families, experience dignity and respect in society and the ability to make choices in various life domains. However, illiteracy among a few women acts as a hindrance to empowerment. Apart from that, some of the major challenges faced by women include lower wages, job instability, double burden and long working hours that often lead to a loss of leisure time. If these challenges can be addressed, it will lead to greater empowerment of the informal women labour in the neoliberal city space.

Keywords: *Neoliberalism, Informal Sector, Empowerment, Women, Employment.*

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Introduction

Women's empowerment is a widely adopted multidimensional model encompassing resources, agency, and achievements. It refers to the process of increasing women's economic, social, and political power (Reshi and Sudha 2022: 1353). These components include human, material, and social preconditions for choice, goal-setting, and action, leading to potential outcomes in addressing gender inequality (Bhojani et al. 2024: 1). The 1945 United Nations Charter established gender equality as a basic right. Article 15 of the Indian Constitution recognises the strength of women and includes gender equality as one of the essential rights. The 1976 National Plan of Action serves as a guideline for women's development, with subsequent measures aimed at empowerment. All developing nations are progressively realising the importance of encouraging women to engage in the economy, thereby empowering them by integrating them into the mainstream development process, helping them regain their economic standing, and providing them with work opportunities (Senapati and Ojha 2019: 163). However, Limited accessibility and strict rules of formal jobs restrict a major portion of women from entering the formal sector. Whereas neoliberal policies of privatisation, deregulation and individual freedom have shrunk public sector jobs, expanded the informal sector due to rapid urban growth, migration and structural adjustment policies. The sudden rise in the informal economy in the neoliberal era is based on various factors such as less amount of employment in the formal sector, the weakening of the idea and benefits of formality, constant increase in temporary job demands, and part-time jobs, and the numerous options for casual work and small businesses (Bromley and Wilson 2018: 9). The general character of the state in the era of neoliberalisation is to create a 'good business or investment climate' for capitalistic endeavours (Harvey 2005: 67) which played a crucial role in fostering integration through social policies and promoting and overseeing the informal sector (Ahmed et al. 2011).

However, in developing countries, the informal economy continues to thrive due to weak governance, inadequate education and infrastructure, widespread poverty, and high demand for affordable goods and services that formal businesses cannot meet (Djidonou and Foster-McGregor 2022: 529). The Informal economy employs about 330 million workers (93% of the total workforce) who are not part of the organised economy (Jena and Mahapatra 2009: 1), and about 90% of India's labour force is employed, which almost contributes 50% of the national income (Srija and Shirke 2014: 40). So Informal sector is not a marginal or temporary but occupies a central part of urban economics especially in global south. These informal businesses were mostly private, exploiting low-wage rural or migrant workers, notably young women, and operating without any regulation (Harvey 2005: 129). Despite being a significant sector, many workers face insecurity, vulnerability, and

struggles. This sector suffers from poor job quality, including low wages, long working hours, unsafe conditions, exploitation, uncertain tenure, and inadequate social security. The informal sector often fails to provide workers with stable livelihoods, leading to widespread social and economic injustice (Jena and Mahapatra 2009: 2).

Due to the impact of neoliberalism, the informal sector today is different from that of prior decades. The neoliberalism has significantly diminished the benefits and security provided to the majority of formal economy workers in both wealthy and poor countries (Bromley and Wilson 2018: 7). A large number of socially and economically unprivileged people are mostly engaged in this, and the majority of employees are migrants from rural regions who have weak educational training and work in low-paying, semi-skilled, or unskilled employment (Mohapatra 2012: 197). This rapid labour informalisation is noticeable, implying a changing character of labour in the twenty-first century (Mezzadri 2020: 156). Female employees have experienced this informalisation to a greater extent in the developing nations (Mohapatra 2012: 197). The proportion of women working informally in developing nations is significantly higher (92%) than that of men (87%) (Bonnet et al. 2019: 5), because women face difficulties in acquiring employment in the formal sector due to their higher rates of illiteracy, family obligations, lower levels of education, a lack of job skills, and societal and cultural hurdles (Mehra 1997: 144; Fapohunda 2012: 35). That is why the informal sector is the only option for them to earn an income (Fapohunda 2012: 36).

Women's participation in paid work, irrespective of the type of work marked as an improvement in their perception of economic independence. Women who participate in the workforce tend to have higher freedom of decision-making and spatial mobility than non-participating women. Women's economic empowerment again fosters self-determination, self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-management, competency, skill, knowledge, attitudes, consciousness, and access to resources (Soputan and Kerebungu 2020: 46). At the same time, larger percentages of earning women tend to experience less domestic violence than women who do not participate in the workforce. Having control over the family purse strings, and especially the fact that some of the money comes from her work, improve the status of women within the household (Jose 2007: 20; Krumbiegel et al. 2020: 77). Women workers are also moving beyond the industry to form alliances with women's organisations and other activist groups, including labour unions, to preserve their social achievements and better their lives (Zaman 2001: 157).

On the other hand, Women encounter the problem of relatively low wages in manufacturing or low-status service sector jobs. The other source for amassing wealth arises out of the super-exploitation of labour power,

particularly of young women migrants from rural areas (Harvey 2005: 148) as a result of urban-focused investments, which have created greater job possibilities for women in cities. The employment of illiterate women in the informal sector has increased because they are willing to accept low wages (Ahmed et al., 2010). They may deal with discrimination based on their gender, which is essentially non-existent in the formal sector (Sharma 2012: 35). Wage disparities, sexual harassment, and excessive pressure are common in the informal economy (Senapati and Ojha 2019: 163). It also emphasises that work environment disadvantages, such as informality, part-time work, and a significant gender wage gap, can diminish women's bargaining power as well (Krumbiegel et al. 2020: 86). This Study aims to explore how informal labour in a Neoliberal city impacts upon women's empowerment, It also attempts to understand the challenges faced by women in the informal economy.

Review of literature

Cities play a crucial role in the reproduction, reconstruction, and ideological evolution of neoliberalism (Banerjee-Guha 2009: 95) due to the lack of dynamism in the rural sector. That's why cities and their suburban zones have become increasingly important geographical targets and institutional laboratories for a wide range of neoliberal policy experiments (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 368; Davies 2014: 3222; Peck et al. 2019: 54). It has been introduced into urban policy regimes, aiming to rejuvenate local economies through deregulation, privatisation, and fiscal austerity. These experiments aim to mobilise city space for market-oriented economic growth, property redevelopment schemes, new social control, policing, increased support for public-private partnerships, and surveillance strategies, and elite consumption practices while securing order among marginalised populations (Peck et.al. 2009: 58).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) first used the term "informal sector" in its Kenya Mission Report in 1972 (Rao 1996: 171; Fapohunda 2012: 37; Bromley and Wilson 2018: 6). International statistical standards define that on the terms of the employment relationship informal employment defined as a job held by an employee must not be subject to national labour law, income taxation, social protection, or entitlement to specific employment benefits for the employment relationship to be considered as informal (Bonnet et al. 2019: 3). A Statistical Picture shows that two billion (or 61% of the world's employed population) earn their living in the informal sector (ILO 2018: 13). In the global context, males are more likely than women to work in informal employment (63% vs. 58%), in developed nations (19% vs. 18%), and emerging countries (69% vs. 64%). It demonstrates that informality exists in all nations, regardless of their level of socioeconomic development. Despite that, developing nations are more common than developed nations

(Bonnet et al. 2019: 5). It is also overrepresented among the poor and those who are marginalised due to their gender, ethnicity, or migration status (Bromley and Wilson 2018: 14). And the scarcity of well-paying jobs in the highly regulated formal sector, coupled with rigid rules, drives many people towards the informal economy. This has resulted in the increased informalisation of labour in the city space (Jonakin 2006: 294).

Since the 1970s, the idea of women's empowerment has been spreading rapidly as a way to describe the changing power dynamics in support of women's rights and greater gender equality (Cornwall 2016: 343). It has evolved in the context of feminist scholars into a guiding principle for considering how to improve women's lives in all of their complex economic, social, cultural, and political dimensions (AI Mamun and Hoque 2022: 1). It's an inclusive process that encourages marginalised and disempowered groups or communities through awareness-raising, proactive participation in public life, and mobilisation for the right entitlements (Sharma 2017: 400), which encompasses increasing women's access to and ability to exercise choice, financial autonomy, decision-making autonomy, and freedom of movement (Mahmud et al. 2012: 611; Mehra 1997: 138).

Research has indicated that women working outside the house have increased self-assurance, independence, control over their family, health awareness, and participation in social activities (Sarwar and Abbasi 2013: 203). Its subjective viewpoint varies from individual to individual based on their own beliefs and values. Hossain's study in Bangladesh demonstrates how readymade garments (RMG) or garment employment has influenced the lives of women workers. His study provides important insights into the economic and social empowerment processes for impoverished women in low-income developing countries (2012: 3). AI Mamun and Hoque demonstrate that paid RMG employment significantly enhances female employees' economic, social, and psychological empowerment. The findings show that women working in RMGs have higher economic capacity, freedom of movement, enhanced capacity for decision-making, greater self-worth, employment skills and experience, and awareness of their rights to make decisions (2022: 1)

Theoretical Framework

Many scholars examining the urban informal sector primarily highlight the struggles, vulnerabilities, and survival strategies of informal workers, including poverty, inequality, and exploitation (Bremar 1996: 45; Hart 1973: 70). However, they often overlook how this very structure can also serve as a site of women's empowerment, particularly for migrant women. Conversely, scholars of women's empowerment tend to emphasise women's agency, yet fail to analyse how this informal sector itself creates opportunities

for women to exercise that agency, which is why they feel empowered despite all the disadvantages of this sector.

This study applies Giddens' structuration theory to understand women's empowerment in the urban informal sector. The duality of structure can be seen as impacting an urban space through various transformations that result from the interaction between the agents and structure (Lamsal, 2012:112). For Giddens, structure refers to a set of rules and resources that regulate human actions, and agency pertains to the activities in which an individual is the doer (Ayuba, 2021: 128; Lamsal, 2012: 113). Neoliberal values form part of the rules and resources in the urban informal sector, which is structured by and reproduces particular forms of social and economic behaviour that guide social practices. This shapes how people work, migrate, consume or make economic decisions. Individuals act within these rules while also reproducing them through daily activities.

There is a popular proposition which states that the oppressed and marginalised individuals can free themselves if they are given the opportunity (Chitnis, 2005: 244). Women's agency leads to empowerment when it exercises questions, challenges, or changes regressive norms and institutions that perpetuate the subordination of women (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016: 238). Within this context of development, scholars have explained the process of empowering women in developing countries, where women exercise agency and adapt to flexible labour markets, easily entering into informal jobs and developing new survival strategies. This theory holds that people are empowered when they have the agency to draw upon existing rules and resources within the social system (Chitnis, 2005: 240). The biggest change noticed is that women's role changes from nurture of the family to equal economic contribution (Spivack & Desai, 2016: 2). These challenges to the traditional habituated gender roles include teaching the next generation, setting examples for children and others transforming the dream and creating social support groups (Spivack & Desai, 2016: 15).

Methodology

Social Settings

The study was conducted in the capital of Odisha, Bhubaneswar. Bhubaneswar is also known as the "Temple City of India," which is located in the eastern part of India. It was designed by German architect Otto Königsberger in 1946 (Chetty and Surawar 2020: 667). The Bhubaneswar urban development area consists of the Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation area. It covers 186 sq. kms (72 sq. mi), which consists of 67 wards (Mishra 2023: 627). The total population of Bhubaneswar constitutes of about 840,834

as per the 2011 Indian census, while males comprised 444,806 (56.05%) of the population in 2011, and females constituted 349,028 (43.95%) of the total population. The growth rate over a decade was 44.9 %. Earmarked as the first smart city project of the government of India, Bhubaneswar has the greatest rate of job growth among 17 Tier-2 cities in India. The primary study was conducted in Mancheswar Industrial Estate, a manufacturing hub in Bhubaneswar. This area is found to be one of the prominent and larger industrial estate patches in Bhubaneswar, which has shown phenomenal progress over the previous two decades (Mishra 2023: 634). This industrial hub houses food processing, agro-based, textile, and small chemical industries, that attract women workers with limited education from both rural and urban areas.

Methods and Data Collection

This Research used both the qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine how the informal economy affects the status of women's empowerment in the neoliberal city. The primary study was conducted in Mancheswar Industrial Estate. Case studies, semi-structured interview schedules, personal interviews and group discussion methods were used to collect primary data from the field. Interviews were conducted with 90 female workers, and 9 case studies were conducted from 3 different informal sectors, such as Aditya Birla fashion retailer, Mangaraj prawn factory and Prime Pickle Factory, where the majority of the workers are females. The respondents participated voluntarily in the interview and group discussion. The interviews were conducted with self-selected participants using the purposive sample method from the above-mentioned 3 factories.

Result and Discussion

Economic Empowerment

Women's ability to exercise choice increases when they have access to employment. Women's economic empowerment is the process of developing capacity, ability/skills, resources, and access to quality income and living standards (Soputan and Kerebungu 2020: 39). This increasing household contributions, women's value and bargaining power inside or outside the family, are clear indications of women's empowerment (Rao 1996: 173; Hossain 2012: 9; Chowdhury 2017: 120; De 2022: 470; AI Mamun and Hoque 2022: 2). The informal economy provides enough opportunities for female employees by providing economic flexibility, keeping them close to city services and amenities, and increasing their knowledge and abilities through training, counselling, and problem-solving with coworkers (Billah and Manik 2017: 184).

Table 1: Income of the Informal Women Labour

Income	No. of Respondents	Percentage
5000-7000	6	6.67
7000-10,000	64	71.11
10,000-15,000	20	22.22
Total	90	100

*Source: Field Data

Table 1 shows the Earning capability of women in the above-mentioned informal sectors, where the majority of women (71.11%) earn between 7000-10,000 per month. The reason for mentioning their economic profile at first because it believes that if women gain access to economic resources, they will be able to make improvements in their lives and have more liberty and self-esteem to make various home and strategic life decisions (Hossain 2012: 9; AI Mamun and Hoque 2022: 7). When we examined the respondents, we discovered that most of the women are quite satisfied with their monthly salaries. Women's wages go directly towards household expenses. They do not rely on any male member of their family for their essential needs or other luxuries. They also contribute almost an equal share of overall household expenses through their salaries. In some cases, where the male member of the family is unable to earn, the female worker takes on all of the family's responsibilities, such as fooding, clothing and health care needs of all family members, and education of the children. So, their economic empowerment was seen here through their financial ability and autonomy, as shown by their economic contribution to their family members. These working women negotiated their roles in the home and society, challenging the notion of male breadwinners as a myth (AI Mamun and Hoque 2022: 5). The women workers felt honoured and happy to be able to contribute financially to their families on a part-time or full-time basis, and even help their parents in repaying their debts as well. Their level of life has increased as a result of their economic independence, and they are grateful for the opportunity to assist and support their family.

Case Study 1: Reema (Anonym), who belongs to a higher caste family, left her schooling and defied societal norms by marrying someone from a lower caste and facing rejection from both her family and in-laws. After migrating to the city, her husband wasted all the money, drank, and neglected to care for her only son. Seeing this situation, she began working at a pickle factory, earning enough to manage household expenses and her son's education. After a while, her family suggested bringing her son back to ease her burden. However, she firmly declined, asserting her capability to manage both her household and her child's upbringing independently.

Decision-making Capacity

Women did not have the same social, political, economic, and cultural rights as men because of patriarchal systems. Men have absolute authority to manage both households and society, while women are often kept at home. The main improvements we want to see in today's society are that women should participate in decision-making because increased decision-making capacity leads to empowerment. Throughout the past, women lost their ability to make decisions due to their lack of financial security, but today's reality is different, and now women also earn. As a result, they were involved in decision-making both inside the family, such as childbearing, marriage, family planning, and child education and beyond the family. Women make independent decisions about personal needs such as clothing, jewellery, and cosmetics, manage expenses like buying gifts for family, walk outside and get vegetables or other supplies from the market, which was once done by male family members. More importantly, they now decide on life partners, family planning, social networks, and even challenge caste boundaries and the dowry system. Work experience enhances women's authority, even in challenging economic conditions, leading to greater involvement in family decision-making (Zaman 2001: 146).

Case study 2: Basanti, a 45-year-old woman who had lived peacefully with her family until her husband's tragic accident left him jobless. So, she eventually joined a textile manufacturing unit at a reputed MNC. Now at this age, she bears full responsibility for her family, her husband's medical expenses and her two children's education. Now she makes all family decisions, and her husband and children accept it. She stated that this job provides her more autonomy and respect in the family as well as in the industry, making her husband and children proud of her.

Table 2: Educational Background of the Respondent

Education	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Illiterate	7	7.78
Primary and upper primary	18	20
Secondary	47	52.22
Higher Secondary	18	20
Total	90	100

**Source: Field Data*

Access to Education

Soputan and Kerebungu Stated that, "What can change the weakness of women's status is nothing but education" (2020: 40). It is a fundamental right and a crucial component of the empowerment of women, which enables them

to fully engage in social, economic, and political realms (Fapohunda 2012: 41). Education gives women the abilities, information, and self-assurance they need to participate in society, assert their rights, and enhance their quality of life (Onuonga 2014: 209). Nowadays, more educated young employees are entering the informal sector in larger numbers. As we can see in Table No. 2, the majority of women working in the informal sector are educated. where the majority of women (52.22%) have at least passed their secondary schooling. Numerous factors, including poverty, gender discrimination, and isolated villages, prevent them from pursuing higher education. Very few (7.78%) are illiterate, yet they understand the value of education and prioritise their children's education. Many young women who have only passed their secondary schooling (20%), who could not complete their degrees due to family constraints, are now saving their earnings to continue their studies. They stated that this industry helps fund their higher education and their siblings' schooling as well.

Case Study 3: Supriya, a 20-year-old who completed her +2 from a local college, couldn't continue her studies due to her father's limited income as a marginal farmer. The entire six-member family has completely relied on his father's small earnings, making it impossible for him to finance her daughter's further education. So, she migrated to Bhubaneswar and worked at a prawn factory, saving money for her higher education in the city. She also financially supports her younger sister's schooling and encourages her to pursue higher education.

Knowledge and self-awareness

Women who work in this informal industry have a greater sense of social awareness. They frequently challenge conservative societal norms, customs, and discrimination against women. Women's participation in employment has a favourable influence on their growth. They are aware of their fundamental rights and actively fight for their rights in the workplace, family and society. Furthermore, they are aware of the factory's working conditions and have improved them with clean washrooms, clean water, constant electricity, and clean surroundings. They feel safe here, and some companies also offer nutritious breakfasts and snacks to their workers. Female employees are also aware of women's rights and governmental schemes and policies, and they gain advantages from them. The strong community meetings enable them to deal with problems, whether they are within or outside the workplace. It appears that their strong social bonds assist them in becoming socially empowered.

Case study 4: Pooja, a young woman of 18 years, just finished her secondary school but couldn't pursue further studies due to financial hardship.

She joined the textile company through a friend and became self-sufficient. She continues to support her family at such a young age; her family members and her community were very proud of her. She enjoys her life and taking advantage of the city's freedoms, where she is learning a lot of things. She said, "What's the point in staying home when I can be independent in this field? I am happy that my life is different and that I can support my family. I will continue to live my life on my terms even after being married".

Table 3: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Location	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Rural	68	75.56
Urban	22	24.44
Total	90	100

*Source: Field Data

Migration

Table 3 indicates that most of the women (75.56%) have migrated from rural areas. Only a small percentage of women (22.44%) are native to the area. The migration is caused by both the push and the pull factors. The main reasons why they left their village and migrated to urban areas include poverty, unemployment, a lack of work opportunities in the nearby area, greater restrictions, a slower pace of mobility, sickness of family members or an unexpected loss of a male breadwinner, and a lack of freedom in the village.

The key pull factors for women migrating to cities include financial opportunity, better living style, less strict system, independence, better quality education and ease of entrance into the informal sector. Before migration, women felt powerless in the village due to a conservative mindset and a lack of opportunities. As per Table No.2, the majority of women have very few educational qualifications, which is a major constraint for them to access the formal sector jobs. That's why they joined the informal sector. They stated that if they don't, they get depressed and feel helpless. They believe that migrating to the city has brought some positive changes to their lives. The research also demonstrates that women are satisfied with their occupations because there are no formal education requirements, fixed working hours, and regular salaries in this industry. They also decided to go to a city where there are more opportunities for a better life.

Case Study 5: Sumitra moved to Bhubaneswar with her elder sister, who was already employed in the same industry for years. Sumitra barely finished the 8th grade of school due to significant family problems. There are not enough employment opportunities in the rural area. Her father works as a sharecropper due to a lack of sufficient farmland in their village for

subsistence, so managing the family is becoming too tough. Both sisters migrated to the city for employment, working in the same industry, enjoying their independence, and contributing to their family's support, which wouldn't be possible without migration.

Access to Resources

Women now have the chance to access financial resources and make investments in mutual funds, LIC, fixed savings, health plans, vehicles, gold, etc. Some women are also helping their husbands to buy or build their own houses. A study by AI Mamun & Hoque in Bangladesh shows that some women are also able to buy a piece of land in the village in their name (2012: 5). Women in the informal sector have had to arrange organisations to preserve their interests, and conventional savings and credit programmes have been mobilised to provide sources of finance for themselves (Fapohunda 2012: 41).

Case study.6: Gayatri is a 31-year-old illiterate woman who lives with her husband and children and works in a prawn factory. The high cost of living in the city makes it tough for her to properly support the family on her husband's low income. Hence, she decided to start working to support her partner. She said she was now helping her husband financially and that they had moved to a better place. They had furnished it with comforts like a refrigerator, washing machine, and television. She also purchased a scooter on an EMI plan and uses her own money to pay the interest each month.

Working in the informal economy has increased the opportunities for advancement of female workers. All of the employees have benefited from it. Women perceived an increase in their freedom of movement as a result of their work. The female workers said that their spouses are increasingly assisting them with domestic tasks. In rural areas, parents send their female young children to the city to work, giving them the freedom to choose their life mate and make their own decisions, and attempting to get their opinion in every area. Their importance in their family has grown, and society's attitudes towards them are changing. Most women report less violence and abuse after entering the labour force. Those young females who work in this field have also refused early marriage, early pregnancy or plans to have one or two children.

Challenges of Women Informal Labour

Informal women workers are characterised by low salaries that often fall short of the minimum standards of living, as well as poor nutrition, long working hours, hazardous working conditions, and a lack of essential services such as drinking water, first aid, and sanitary facilities at the workplace (Mohapatra 2012: 202). However, in addition to the problem of economic

survival, lack of assets, women's double burden, patriarchal restrictions, vulnerability, lack of choice, insecurity, and social isolation, exploitation as cheap labour are significant elements that affect not only the participation of women in the informal sector but also their capacity to organise their associations (Rao 1996: 174). The migrant women who are semi-skilled, low-skilled, or unskilled, this may mean that they enter a low-paying, unorganised sector where they are more likely to be exploited and abused (Mohapatra 2012: 202). The majority of the female employees stated that certain people in their communities were still defaming and disrespecting factory workers because of the social stigma associated with women working outside. Many studies argue that this type of work is linked to the following problems, such as: lack of sufficient social protection, instability of employment trajectory, low labour income and deprivation of labour entitlements, lack of sufficient protection from an unfavourable work environment and organisation; and scarcity of freedom of association, speech, and collective bargaining (Bromley and Wilson 2018: 6). This Sector also threatens to lead to more poverty, inequality, and slower economic growth, and has always been challenging, physically taxing, and marked by dangerous circumstances, including fire dangers, sexual harassment, overtime payments, and physical and verbal abuse (Hossain 2012: 17).

Economic Challenges

Women in this sector often face irregular work schedules, making it difficult to maintain a stable income. Research findings reveal that some of these women struggle to earn a sufficient living in the informal economy. As we can see in Table 1, some women (6.67%) also earn less than 7000 a month, and the majority (71.11%) are between 7000 and 10,000, which is very difficult to survive in the city. Due to the rapid urbanisation, inflation also increases each year. In this situation, they were compensated insufficiently to meet their basic requirements. They live in very poor housing conditions in overcrowded slum regions lacking essential amenities such as nutritious food, clean water, a clean atmosphere, and so on. They also cannot afford a higher education for their children or a healthy lifestyle for themselves. They will be unable to overcome such challenges throughout their lives.

Case Study 7: Soudamini, a 52-year-old woman, has worked in a pickle factory for 15–16 years but now struggles with poor health. Despite the need for rest and care for herself, she is not able to afford it for herself. Earning less than ₹10,000 per month for years, she spent her savings on her children's education and marriage and even took a loan for her daughter's wedding. With no financial security, she cannot leave her job, yet continued work is worsening her health. She also avoids taking leave because it results in a reduced salary, leaving her unable to access proper medical care or much-needed rest.

Future Aspiration

It is also evident that a large number of workers do not see their occupations as viable options for the future because they don't have any financial security or insurance after retirement, no savings due to low wages, and no alternative work options at an older age. As a result, they spend their later years in very poor conditions, lacking adequate health care and support. Women in the informal industry are paid very little despite putting in a lot of overtime, but still working at the same level where they started. There are still a few opportunities for growth or increment due to a lack of education. Most young women in this sector are not highly ambitious; they join because village life offers little freedom and poverty with a lower standard of living. They are working in this sector because it is the only field where entry is very easy, and they get to enjoy city living and enough freedom without any restrictions from their families. They don't have any plans for the future. Their family's financial hardships are the reason they are here. After getting married, the majority of single girls would quit their jobs.

Case Study 8: Deepali, a 24-year-old woman, has been working at the prawn factory for five years but remains dissatisfied due to low pay, no holidays, no security, and long 10-hour shifts, including half-days on Sundays. Her monthly salary doesn't go beyond 8,000/- per month. He is residing in a private mess with four to five girls sharing a small room because of the high expense of living in the city. She saw no long-term prospects in her job and faced multiple rejections from potential groom's families due to her employment. Consequently, she decided to quit her job after marriage.

Table 4: Marital Status of the Respondents

Marital Status	No. of respondents	Percentage
Married	52	57.78
Unmarried	38	42.22
Total	90	100

**Source: Field Data*

Double Burden

Table 4 shows that the Majority of women are married (57.78%). So, both family and factory responsibilities burdened most women. Patriarchal gender norms, such as expecting women to handle childcare and household work while men control marital decisions, further restrict women's agency, income-earning opportunities, and decision-making power. For mothers of small children, these challenges intensify, as infants require constant care and breastfeeding (Bhojani et al. 2024: 6). They have no holidays and work 9

to 10 hours a day in the industry. They fail to give enough attention to their families or themselves. When both the husband and wife leave for work, there is almost no one to care for their children. The majority of these working women's children do not receive the attention they need. The absence of parental support also hinders their children's academic progress. Due to the infrequency of holidays, the young ladies who left their village are also unable to see their parents. Even they are unable to present whether any of their family members are suffering.

Case study 9: Sushma is a married woman with two children: a one-year-old daughter and a four-year-old son. She chose to work in a textile company since she couldn't sustain her family on her husband's salary. She took maternity leave from the workplace and did not get paid during that period. After delivery, she decided to return, but it was too hard for her to leave her newborns with her grandmother for eight or ten hours. Because of this, her spouse also frequently complains that she fails to care for his family properly. She can't manage her home and work at the same time, and she feels extremely helpless.

It shows that most of the time, women feel alienated doing the same work over and over again with little or no chance to progress. Gender-specific work culture is also followed. More females than males are employed in this industry, but men dominate most of the higher positions. Illiteracy frequently provides a barrier to empowerment because many informal sectors at least need matriculation for entrance, and those with less education receive lower pay and have very limited mobility in these fields. Since there aren't enough opportunities in the formal sector, many of them still work in the informal sector despite being well-educated. Due to the intense workload in this industry and the lack of set hours or holidays, they are prevented from enrolling in further education. They can't switch to a better formal job and work for the rest of their lives in these low-paying jobs with incredibly few opportunities for advancement.

Conclusion

Women's subjugation in India has a long history due to its patriarchal nature. She always depended upon male members in her entire life. But this study indicates that women in the informal sector generate income, enjoy freedom of movement, autonomy, build self-confidence, and enhance their overall well-being. This process ultimately contributes to their empowerment. Due to the neoliberal policies in urban development, the informal sector's situation is now steadily transforming. Their employment process also improved and gave employees contract letters, paid time off, maternity leave, overtime pay, tiffin at work, daycare services, amenities, and workplace

medical care. Due to numerous obligations, rules, and regulations which prevent them from accessing any kind of formal employment, the informal sector greatly helps those women become independent; as a result, they are now both financially and socially autonomous. The most common advantages of their job in this sector were the increased sense of independence, the lighter load on their family, and their capacity to support themselves. The informal sector assists women who lack higher education. They no longer feel deprived because of this; instead, they feel empowered as active contributors of capital to their families. The decision-making capacity is no longer solely in the hands of male members; females are gradually taking over the capacity because of the financial viability. The number of households led by a single mother is increasing, which means that many women are taking on the role of solo caretaker and source of financial support for their children. They are treated with respect and dignity at the workplace and in their communities, which has given them a greater sense of empowerment. The majority of women are satisfied with their employment, becoming more ambitious as they make choices in various aspects of their lives.

On the other hand, informal women labour negotiation with low salaries and domestic demand, the double burden of home and workplace, no increment or future assurance, working in the same position for an extended period, living in such poor or unsanitary conditions, a lack of food or health care facilities, and a negative attitude towards women workers are among the major issues that women workers in the informal sector have faced. Due to the larger participation of women workers in the informal sector, factory owners have shown little interest in improving state of health, education, and public safety for women and girls or adjusting management practices to increase the productivity of skilled female workers. Despite these obstacles, social and economic empowerment for women and girls in the field has increased. If these challenges can be addressed, it will lead to greater empowerment of informal women labour.

Note

The names used in this paper are anonymous.

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