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Grinding Realities
Women and Breastfeeding in the Informal Sector

By
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Mumbai, India
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Women constitute a majority of the work force in the informal sector everywhere. The informal sector is unregulated, unprotected, supports the formal sector and so matches the profile of women in a society organised on patriarchal values and practices. In South Asia, more than 90 per cent of the workforce is employed in the informal economy. The informal economy also acts as a sponge, absorbing retrenched, uneducated and untrained workers.

Though women workers in the informal economy (the unorganised sector) are engaged in employment activities which contribute significantly to the GDP of a country, their economic and social contribution remains hidden, under or unvalued. The heterogeneous nature of the informal economy ranging from part time and irregular workers in East Asia to home based, self employed, sub contract workers in South east and South Asia, makes computing the economic as well as social contribution by workers of this sector difficult.

Apart from paid work, women workers in both the formal as well as the informal sectors also carry the double burden of domestic work and being care takers of the family. This work is neither valued nor respected and is considered a woman’s responsibility, ‘a role she was born to play’. A breastfeeding mother is considered to be fulfilling her ‘obligations as a woman’ thereby relegating this important activity as yet another work a woman has to do. Breast milk is a form of food security and provides a healthy start for the next generation of labour force.

A woman worker is reproached for not breastfeeding her infant, yet she is not given support for this (by reducing her domestic work, giving her privacy to breast feed or express milk, income security etc.). The World Health
Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life. Now this requires a set of pre-assumed conditions such as close proximity between mother and child, which further implies paid maternity leave, income security, good nutrition for mother, adequate resting time, etc.

However, the reality for women workers in the informal sector, (who are usually piece-rate or daily wage workers) is that they are not recognised as workers, hence they cannot get paid maternity leave. Any leave or stoppage of work means loss of income and subsequently loss of job. Poverty effectively ensures that good nutrition for women remains a mere theoretical requirement and a pious platitude.

As a breastfeeding mother who has been fortunate to be in a progressive women’s organisation, I breastfed my son exclusively for six months and continued to breastfeed him on demand for one year. This was possible because the organisation I work with is supportive and arranged for a creche facility at my workplace. I also got support from my colleagues and family. But women workers in the informal sector face a different reality. Gender sensitive analysis of issues of workers in the informal sector along with a deeper understanding of work pre-supposed as woman’s work is important. This book has delved deep into the issues facing different sub-sectors of the informal economy and how these factors interplay with women workers’ reproductive and domestic roles. The correlation between variables of productive and reproductive labour has been brought out in a lucid manner.

Movements working on women’s labour, health, education and other human rights issues need to recognise the inter-linkages that exist in situations of poor women - that they are women and workers as well, that they all face similar problems with regard to ill health and poor nutrition, illiteracy or lack of education and training, low wages and appalling working conditions, exploitation and sexual harassment.

Thus it is important for the labour movement (both traditional trade union movement and alternative organising efforts in the informal sector), that breastfeeding, health and women’s movements form linkages to support women workers in the informal sector. There is need to bridge the gap between
women’s economic and reproductive labour, paid and unpaid work done by women in the informal sector. This book can be a stepping stone for activists and development practitioners in women’s movement, labour movement and the breastfeeding movement to work together towards a suitable solution for establishing a women-friendly work environment

More Power to Women!

Deepa Bharathi
Committee for Asian Women (CAW)
21 November 2005
Bangkok, Thailand
Look around you and see who is working. Are the workers that you see men or women, young or old, parents or childless people? Are they working for pay? Could their work be done by a skilled person of either sex, or is it linked specifically to being male or female?

Usually work refers to the activities that bring an income into the household. Sometimes the domestic activities that keep a household going, and the care that is given to the people within the household, are also recognized as work. But seldom do people count child-bearing as work (even though they call the process of birth 'labour'). Having babies is just “something women do,” and they are expected to “get on with it” in their private lives without reference to the public sphere of economic activity. Yet having babies is work. It has a profound effect on women’s opportunity to participate in the public sphere. And because babies grow up to be the next generation of workers, everyone has a stake in their well-being.

Women do most of the work that maintains the home and provides care for family members, but usually this work is invisible to economic and political policy-makers. It is not accounted for in national economic statistics. Likewise, much of the work done in the informal sector lies outside the systems of regulation, taxation, legal contracts, and accounting that provide data about national economic activity. In many nations, women do much more work in the informal economy than in the formal economy. Thus, women’s work is largely invisible, unrecognized, unreported, and easily taken for granted.
Breastfeeding, too, is largely invisible. It happens mostly at home, in the private sphere. It turns out an invisible product. Only Norway includes the value of human milk as food in its GDP. Even though universal exclusive breastfeeding and complementary feeding could prevent almost 20 per cent of infant deaths worldwide, no nation formally accounts for the contribution that breastfeeding makes to health promotion. Pascal Villeneuve, UNICEF Chief of Health, has called breastfeeding “the single most efficient intervention for preventing childhood deaths...From the point of view of child health, the number one health worker is the mother.”* Yet the input from these health workers...these mothers... is invisible.

Breastfeeding draws upon a woman’s time and energy, just like any other work that she does. When a childbearing woman joins the public sphere as a worker in the formal or informal economy, she needs to modify her workload to accommodate breastfeeding. This need may affect the kinds of work she is able to take up. In addition, the demands of her working life may place limits on her opportunities to breastfeed her child.

This book sets two areas of concern side by side: first, the harsh realities of life for women who work in the informal sector; second, the effect that work has on these women’s opportunity to breastfeed their children. This discussion brings women's invisible work out where it can be seen and understood.

Grinding Realities focuses its attention on India, where the great majority of women's work is in the informal sector, and where breastfeeding is still a valued part of family life. The lessons of this book, however, can be applied to any nation. Every country has its own informal economy. Every country is affected by internal migration or by immigration. The proportion of female-headed households is increasing in many countries, and these households are usually the poorest in any community. Women in every country face the challenges of gender-based work roles, whether in political life, the marketplace, academia, or in their homes.

* “Conference meets on scaling up child survival”, 24 April 2004
With her baby at her breast, a woman provides vital nurturing and protection... whether her other work is done for high pay, low pay, or no pay. This book is a tool to help anti-poverty advocates, women's advocates, and breastfeeding advocates campaign on behalf of women living in poverty. All women have the right to breastfeed. This book supports that right.

Chris Mulford  
Co-coordinator  
Women and Work Task Force, WABA  
USA  
21 November 2005

[1] 24 April 2004 “Conference meets on scaling up child survival”  
About the Authors

**Lakshmi Menon** has been active in the women’s movement, consumer and health movements since 25 years. A trained librarian, she has devised a classification system with a feminist perspective. She has helped set up appropriate information systems in India and abroad and helps train NGOs in information management. With information dissemination as her commitment, she has compiled, edited and documented several publications on development issues, especially on women and health issues. She co-founded Akshara: a Women’s Resource Centre and was involved in the founding of the Association for Consumers’ Action on Safety and Health Centre (ACASH). Based in Mumbai, India, Lakshmi is a Consultant to WABA and is currently co-coordinating its Gender Programme.

**Vibhuti Patel** is professor and head of the Post Graduate University Department of Economics, SNDT Women’s University, Mumbai India, and holds a Doctorate in Economics. She was a visiting faculty at the Development Studies Institute of The London School of Economics and Political Science during 1992-93. She is a Ph. D. guide since 1988. She is an Academic Advisor of Sophia Center for Women’s Studies and development, Mumbai and is the editor of its journal *Urdhva Mula*. She is the trustee of Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT), VACHA – a Women’s Resource Centre, Women Research and Action Group (WRAG) and OLAKH: a Feminist Resource Centre. She is the founder member of several NGOs and is actively involved in the women’s movement from its inception. Vibhuti has authored *Women’s Challenges of the New Millennium* by Gyan Publication, Delhi, 2002 and co-authored two books: *Indian Women - Change and Challenge and Reaching for Half the Sky*, 1985. She has also authored several research monographs on women’s issues and has presented over 200 papers in national and international seminars and meetings on development and gender issues.
Introduction

End to Juggling Paid and Unpaid Work?

This booklet is meant as an aid for groups involved in the advocacy of breastfeeding. It basically looks at the harsh conditions of life of women workers in the informal sector in which most women are employed, their miserable economic, social and health conditions, and the real problems and constraints they face in breastfeeding their children and nurturing them. A good understanding of these ground realities should help work out a proper strategy and programmes for the promotion of breastfeeding among these women.

Women account for a majority of informal sector workers. Women’s participation in non-agricultural labour force in the informal sector during 1991-97 was 97 per cent in Benin and Chad, 96 per cent in Mali, 91 per cent in India, 88 per cent in Indonesia, 8 per cent in Guinea, 82 per cent in Kenya, 74 per cent in Bolivia, 69 per cent in El Salvador, and 67 per cent in Brazil. The informal sector is the primary source of employment for women in many developing countries. One reason is the undue burden women have to bear in household maintenance, and another is the extreme insecurity of poor households, more specifically female-headed households, and their reliance on multiple income-earning strategies for survival. For instance, in India, over 90 per cent of the women workers are engaged in the unorganised sector and nearly 75 per cent are illiterate. Poverty is the main driver of the informal sector.

In order to understand the lives of women in the informal sector and their ability to access and sustain their and their children’s health, it is necessary to understand what is implied by “informal sector”. The difference between the formal and informal sector is primarily based on the type or size of enterprise, and the conditions of employment. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), on the basis of type of enterprise, the informal sector is characterised by ease of entry, reliance on indigenous resources, family ownership, small-scale operations, intensive labour, adaptive technology skills acquired outside the formal education system, and unregulated and competitive markets that function outside government control and regulation. On the basis of conditions of employment, it is marked by an absence of organisation amongst the labour force, due to the lack of a formal working contract, and the absence of a clear employer-employee relationship.

### DEFINITIONS OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL SECTORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal Sector</th>
<th>Informal Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>By type and size of enterprise</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to entry</td>
<td>Ease of entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses foreign capital</td>
<td>Reliance on indigenous resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitalist enterprise</td>
<td>Family ownership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imported technology</td>
<td>Adaptive technology/labour intensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal training</td>
<td>Skills acquired outside formal education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulated markets</td>
<td>Unregulated/competitive markets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within government policy</td>
<td>Outside government control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>By conditions of employment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal working contract</td>
<td>No formal working contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular employment</td>
<td>Irregular employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixed wage</td>
<td>No wage relation, uncertain earnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear working hours</td>
<td>Uncertain hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent employment with legal protection</td>
<td>No permanent employment and no legal protection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The informal sector is thus characterised by low pay, no chances for upward career prospects, low security of employment and bad working conditions. The informal sector functions not separate from but subordinated to the formal sector. A sizeable portion of informal sector goods and services are produced by means of contracting and subcontracting, which are paid for on piecework rather than a time-rate basis. Much of the economic activity in the informal sector is founded on capital from the formal sector. Given the low cost of labour and the fact that goods and services in the informal sector are taxed minimally or not at all, the profit earnings for capital invested are huge.

Women usually have less negotiating power, lower literacy, multiple responsibilities, and their immediate need to have a job – any job at any pay – to keep the family going. Thus they often get the worst jobs – the most tedious, the most hazardous, at the lowest wage, and with total lack of job security.

The increasing employment of women in the informal sector points to the fact that women will engage in various odd jobs and economic activities to ensure the survival of their families in times of crisis. Woman can be found working informally in various informal work settings (see Appendix 1) – such as home-based work, domestic work and construction work, often migrating in search of work. A vast majority of women workers in this sector are poor and unskilled. Women become adept at a particular kind of work only through repetitive work and long practice. If skills exist in some cases they are confined to traditional occupations such as tailoring, spinning, weaving and basket making.

However as women take on additional jobs they face numerous problems both at home and at the workplace such as the multiple burdens of productive and reproductive work; below-minimum wages, long working hours and harsh working conditions; lack of social protection due to the absence of clear employer-employee relations, and lack of access to benefits such as maternity benefits, medical care or salary increments; and lack of job security, skills, and capital. The problem is compounded by the “no work, no pay” principle,
where the woman will lose her day’s wages if she takes time off for visiting the health centre or breastfeed her child.

At home, patriarchal norms make sure that these women eat least and eat last. Their low wages, combined with rising food prices, make their diet nutritionally imbalanced, with hunger-staving cereals making much of their food. Micronutrients and vitamins are mostly inaccessible, as vegetables, fruits, milk, egg and meat are out of the economic reach of most of these women. Consequently, the majority of the women working in the informal sector are undernourished and anaemic, vulnerable to numerous debilitating chronic and acute diseases. The health of the women in the informal sector is therefore extremely precarious.

And though women’s entire earnings go towards maintenance of the household and are critical to the family’s survival, men are still perceived as the family’s sole breadwinners, with social status, rights and privileges associated with it, and women’s contribution is seen as merely supplementing the family income. Even with their important roles as income-earners, house workers, and child bearers and nurturers, women have generally no “say” in the family, and are relegated to a low status in the family and in society.

It is in this context, and keeping in mind these realities that we must look at programmes and policies for the promotion of breastfeeding. This booklet is thus an attempt to understand the position of women in the informal sector vis a vis women’s productive and reproductive work.

Section I details the plight of women workers in the informal sector following globalisation. It also looks at another aspect of women’s informal work that is, housework, caring, nurturing, including breastfeeding, which need to be counted and valued; and the problems and the challenges of breastfeeding faced by women workers in the informal sector. Section II gives recommendations for improving the lives of women in the informal sector, including viability of breastfeeding. Section III contains an annotated bibliography of resources compiled from 12 libraries/resource centres in three countries. The booklet also includes information, such as the ILO Convention 177 on Homework, situation of women workers in specific settings of the
informal sector, campaign efforts by informal sector women workers and UNIFEM’s framework for policy and action.

Since India has a large labour force of women in the informal sector, we found it relevant to include two papers by Vibhuti Patel on the situation in India with recommendations specific to the Indian context. However these situations being generally global in nature, the recommendations can be modified to suit specific needs and situations.

We hope that the booklet will help advocates of breastfeeding to appreciate the problems faced by women in the informal sector, so they can plan their advocacy strategies accordingly. We also hope that activists involved in the labour movement, women’s organisations, health groups and breastfeeding advocates will work together to improve women’s lives.

Lakshmi Menon  
Co-coordinator  
WABA Gender Programme  
Mumbai, India  
25 November 2005  
International Day for Eliminating Violence Against Women