

A Glimpse on the Life of Women Beedi Workers: North Madras

Abhinaya Mohan

Research Scholar

Department of Southeast Asian Studies

University of Madras, Chennai, India

Abstract: Women have shifted from the traditional role of being homemakers to a immarkable growth of becoming society builders. There are more number of women workers in the Unorganized sector apart from the IT Sector. As the number of women workers are increasing so is the problem faced by these workers. Women are posted as the vulnerable sect of the society especially in the unorganized sector where there are more number of reported cases of harassment, discrimination of wages, no job security etc. Hence to protect the rights of women there were many laws that were formed, many unions that came forward to protect the interest of the working women and create an awareness of the existing law. One such vulnerable unorganized sector where there are more number of women Labourers is the Beedi workers present in the area of North Madras. This is one of the most sort unorganized sector jobs taken over by women in this area. This article briefs on the topic of the Life women in the beedi working community and the efforts of the unions taken hence to protect them.

Women Workers are present in all fields in the society from the field of corporate to unorganized labour sector we find the role of women workers pivotal. In the primitive age also the role of women was more to do than men since women in the primitive society was assigned the task of food production and household functions while men played only the role of hunting. with emergence of new technological changes and development there was societal change but the role of women remained intact where again women were assigned dual task and men still took the task of primary position in employment.

Women till date from the historical times have undergone exploitations and this scenario continuous to persist till date especially in the unorganized sector of the society. If we run back in history to study about the exploitations of women we come across ancient writers like Kalidas defining a new class of the society called the “GANIKA” or “Deva dasis” who were found in the south Indian temples. Unorganized workers are informal sector are groups or sector of workers in the society who do not fall under the following category:

1. Low level of organization, small in scale
2. Heterogeneity of activity
3. Easy entry and exit
4. Minimal capital investment
5. Labour intensive work
6. Labour relation based on casual employment and or social relationship as opposed to formal contracts.

Workers who have temporary employment with small scale enterprise or units not registered with the government and usually considered as unregulated class of the society.

Beedi Workers

Beedi workers are workers working in the field of Beedi production and this field is recognized of one of the prominent sectors in unorganized sectors. Beedi is a thin cigarette or small cigarette filled with tobacco flakes usually wrapped in a tobacco leaf or tambourine with a string or adhesive. It is also called as a poor man's cigarette and a standard Beedi contains about 2 grams of rolled tobacco flakes.

The four main steps involved in the making of Beedi are

1. Rewinding the thread.
2. Cutting /chopping the Beedi leaves
3. Rolling the Beedi
4. Folding the Beedi head

Beedi working is considered as one of the most sorted unorganized sector where there are more number women employees since the main requirement for employment is not time consuming or does not demand the workers to come to the factory for work hence there are more number of women employed in this field as compared to men since women can stay back at home and perform this job. This job requires no technical knowledge hence at some places even children work or very old people are involved. Wage for this sector is based on quantity or piece rate system and thus requires employees to produce to that specific quantity of Beedi in a particular day.



In Chennai there are more number of people employed in the unorganized sector in which one prominent job undertaken by the women is Beedi production. We can find more number of Beedi workers in the northern part of Chennai. Most women present in the field are old women and housewives who have zero technical knowledge and have low educational qualification.

A study taken in one of the Beedi making factory is described in this article . This factory is owned and run by Salim Aktar who has been owning this factory for years and has a number of employees who are mostly women and old people (50 and above) who have been associated with this factory for many years. This factory is located in a place called Pullianthope, North Chennai and also has an association with the Trade union CITU in connection with the CPI(M) Party. The visit and focus group discussion gave a very different perspective from the manager , Trade Union leaders and the workers .

First with the manager who has been running the factory for over four decades feels that Beedi which was once in demand and popular has began to deteriorate over the period for more demands for cigarettes but still, he says that somehow, the factory still manages to make a nominal profit. The very first time when enquired about the relationship with the trade union the management said that they have a cordial and a very friendly relationship with the union and that the union members were very cooperative with the functioning of the management. The unions also said that they encourage the workers to join in the union for the benefit and safety of that worker. Though there comparatively more profits in the northern part of India, than the south the management decided to continue their business in Southern India especially North Chennai where they started their roots. The management also feels the need for Unions to exist with the right support from an political party. Here the union acts as middle men between the management and the workers and are neutral for the flourishing of company.

Packing of the Beedis in the factory



The union is attached with a political party for strengthening of the union. This is a nationalized union called CITUC (Center of India Trade Union Congress) that is attached to the CPI(Communist Party of India).The local Union office is located in Washermenpet, North Madras where the Union is functioning . This union is affiliated with a number of Companies and one such company that the union is active is the Beedi Production Company situated in Pulianthope. When enquired with the union about its functioning, and their role in the company with the employees the first thing that the union said was that the management was very cooperative in the functioning of the union and that they often allowed the union to interfere in matters related to employee welfare and never came between the Employees and union and that was easy for the Functioning of the Union in this company. The union helps employees to not only get their rights but also helps the employees personally by paying for the education of their kith and kin, Helps in getting loans for personal benefit, helps at times of natural crisis.

The union has a separate redressal committee for women headed by Ms. Jayanthi and the CPI and CITU North Madras division head Mr. Babu takes care of the effective functioning of the Union in these areas.

In this Beedi factory there are mostly old people and women employees employed who are all members of the Union. The union head comes to the factory and collects the Union fee. These employees get the benefit of performing the task from their homes and are asked to bring the finished product back to the factory in

the evenings. The employees are provided with the Raw materials and are given a particular target which they have to complete by dusk. They are paid on a quantity basis and usually it is daily wages for them. Women find this job easier compared to any other work for the solely benefit of performing the task from home and most people employed in this factory are from in and around the area. These employees are also allowed to perform dual employment and the company or factory never restricts them from doing so. Though all are members of the Union and the union helps these employees in securing their job and also provides other benefits most of them are still unaware of the women labour laws and benefits arising from thereon. The employees helps and supports the union and the management in every task of theirs and feel that the Union is like their God mother but still are under the pretext that the law does not support for them and are not adequate irrespective of their unawareness of most of them laws but to the surprise these employees feel that the union is functioning effectively due to the support of the Communist party or due to the political interference. Lives of women in this field are secure and safe and does not require much training or education hence women who are old and with physical disability also feel that they have an employment and can support their needs without anyone help.

Though there are number laws present these people are still unaware of many and do not wish to learn them either.

There was data collected from three level of the Beedi workers

1. From the Managerial perspective
2. Trade Union Perspective
- 3.10 women Beedi workers

The following are the major inferences from the interview from the Manager of Beedi workers :

- The manager always believe that the union leaders should be from the workers community
- All the workers of this factory are the members of the trade union
- The manager believes that he is aware of most of the labour laws and some specific women labour laws
- The Beedi worker factory has an women redressal committee and the major issues of this redressal committee are harassment, discrimination of women, job insecurity and sometimes intolerable working conditions.
- The manager usually has a monthly meeting with the trade union leader whereas meeting with the employees/ workers is held only when there is an issue/problem.
- The manager educates the workers of their labour laws.
- When asked about strikes the manager says he has never witnessed the strike.

The next set of questionnaire was surveyed with the Trade union leader and the following were the major inferences:

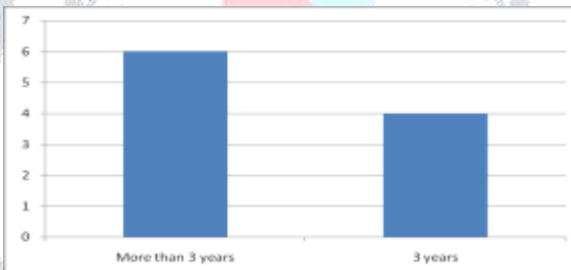
- The trade union leaders held meeting very often with the workers
- The trade union leaders always seem to have personal contact with all the workers.
- The trade union leaders seem to have to training for leadership or labour laws although they feel that training is necessary for them at times.
- All the trade union feels that trade union leaders should be recruited from the working community.

- The trade union leaders have witnessed several strikes and most of them are of Safety and security Reasons.
- Most of the trade union leaders hold General body meeting monthly.
- Trade union leaders are very confident about labour laws and seem to know most of the laws, when asked about women labour laws they feel they are aware only some of the women labour laws.
- Trade Union leaders are made aware of the laws only from Newspaper and other media.
- One of the major inferences made was that Trade union leaders feel the need to be associated with the political party for more security.

The inferences that was obtained from surveying 10 women beedi workers are as follows :

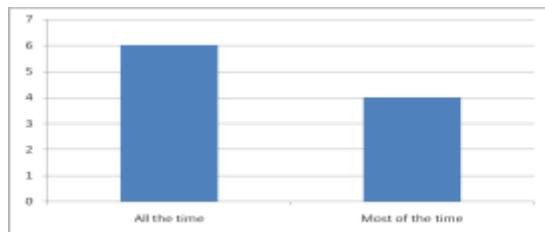
- All the 10 women workers were the members of the CITU
- Out of the 10 workers 6 workers have been a member for more than 3years while 4 workers have joined the union for the past 3 years.

How Long Have you been Members of the Trade Union?	
Particulars	No. of Respondents
More than 3 years	6
3 years	4
Total	10



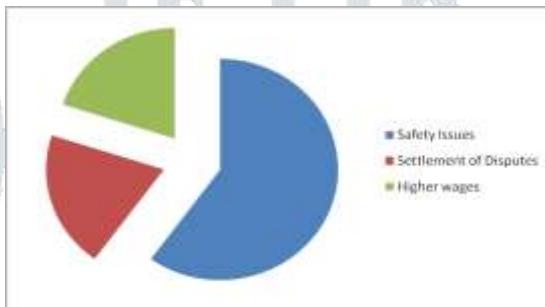
- While asked about familiarity of the work of the trade union all the workers said they were very much familiar and aware with the work performed by the trade union
- All the women workers are of the opinion that being a member of the union provides security for them.
- While asked about frequency and contact of the trade union leaders and the workers, all workers felt that they were very frequently contacted by the leader.
- The trade union leaders seem to organize monthly meetings.
- While asked about strikes the workers 4 out of 10 workers felt that they are consulted before the strike while 6 workers felt that they were consulted all the time before the strike.

Are you Consulted by the Trade Union before a strike is launched?	
Particulars	No. of Respondents
All the time	6
Most of the time	4
Total	10



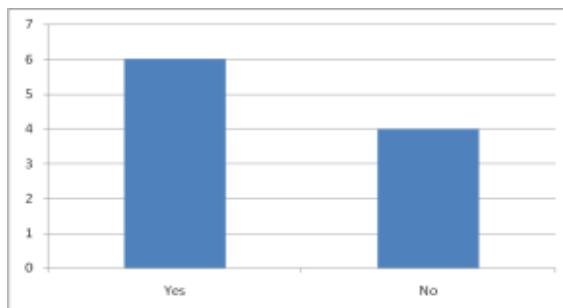
- While asked about reasons for strike 6 workers have said safety issues while two have said to settle disputes and 2 for higher wages.

Reasons for Strike	
Particulars	No. of Respondents
Safety Issues	6
Settlement of Disputes	2
Higher wages	2
Total	10



- While asked about workers participation in the strike, 6 of them have said that they have participated while 4 have of them have not.

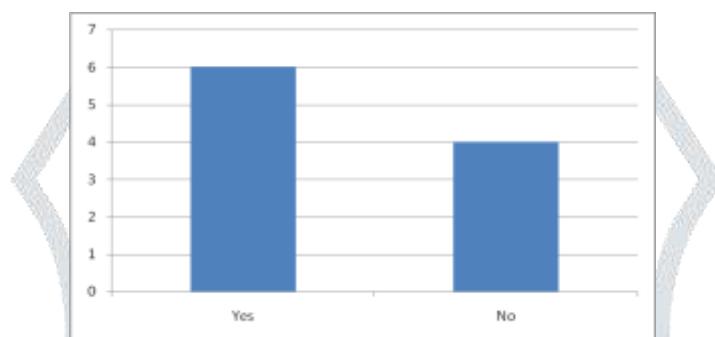
Have You participated in Strikes	
Particulars	No. of Respondents
Yes	6
No	4
Total	10



- All the 10 workers feel women are very safe in this field. None of the 10 women Labourers interviewed have any awareness of the labour laws

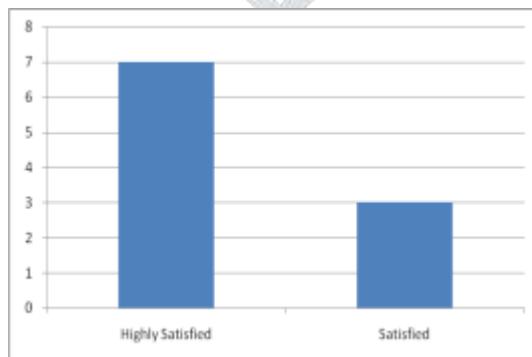
- When asked about Redressal committee all of them have said that there is a redressal committee and most of issues of the committee have been with that of job security, working conditions and harassment.
- While asked about if trade union leaders educate them about the labour laws, 6 of them have said no while 4 have said sometimes.

Does Trade Union leaders educate you on the labour laws?	
Particulars	No. of Respondents
Yes	6
No	4
Total	10



- All 10 workers feel that leaders of trade union must be from the workers.
- These 10 workers also feel that political connect will give security for their trade union.
- While asked if they were satisfied with the union about 7 of them said highly satisfied while 3 of them said satisfied

Are you satisfied with functioning of the Trade Union?	
Particulars	No. of Respondents
Highly Satisfied	7
Satisfied	3
Total	10



- However all the 10 women workers had high confidence in the trade union.

Unorganised sector may have adequate or inadequate labour laws but the fact is these laws do not reach the workers at all and if at all the Government is legislating new laws for these workers, it is only the trade unions who are able to prevent exploitation and protect the workers from the capitalistic managers. However, it is surprising that there are factories such as these were the manager, workers and the Trade Union are able to complement each other and work for the welfare of the workers and even provide security to them .

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