

Opinion

Pakistan: Oppression of women workers

Thursday 8 March 2012, by [MUSTAFA Zubeida](#) (Date first published: 28 March 2012).

ON April 11, the Arts Council auditorium in Karachi resounded with festivity. The first National Convention on Home Based Workers (HBW) was being held there. The disturbance caused by crying babies and chattering women did not detract from the gravity of the serious stuff that was under discussion.

For long, women have been an invisible force in Pakistan as they have sustained the family quietly while keeping a low profile.

But the reality is now emerging that as workers in the informal sector their role is no less significant even though they continue to remain in the background. Ume-Laila Azhar, executive director of Homenet Pakistan, one of the organisers of the convention, informed participants in a media briefing that in 2007 a fifth of Pakistan's GDP came from the informal sector comprising 20 million workers of which 12 million were women.

With globalisation and liberalisation of international trade, this sector has been growing over the years as has been the number of women who enter it. Their desperation, and with it, their exploitation has also been increasing. All this figures nowhere in official records because the home-based worker is not counted as a member of the labour force by the government.

Without any social security or support but in need of resources to provide for their family, women turn to home-based work

as it is easier to access. It doesn't demand stringent qualifications and education. They embroider and stitch garments, make bangles, roll incense sticks, make paper bags, process food and even make some items for the electrical goods industries.

Their versatility is beyond belief.

But also beyond belief is the hard labour they put in for a pittance. Zahida from Karachi and Zarina from Hyderabad left the audience flabbergasted when they spoke of their remunerations. A dress that sells for Rs1,000-plus fetches them barely Rs5 but requires hours of work. It is no better in other manufacturing sectors or in other Third World countries. Remember the sweatshops of Bangladesh?

Obviously, this situation has been created by women's economic needs, the inhumanity and avarice of manufacturers/middlemen out to earn hefty profits by exploiting helpless workers and the unwillingness or inability of weak governments to exercise social controls and regulate conditions for labour.

The home-based workers' case is an enigmatic one. ILO's C-177 convention defines them as persons who carry out remunerative work in their home or any other premises but not at the workplace of the employer. The nature of their relationship with the manufacturer is tenuous; they never meet and the middlemen ensure this lack of contact, making regulation difficult.

That is why the primary demand of civil society organisations such as HomeNet Pakistan, Aurat Foundation, Sungi, etc has been that the government should formulate a national policy for home-based women workers as stipulated by C-177. This is said to be at the drafting stage.

If the government and society had a conscience they would have paid some attention to these workers who have not been able to lobby for their cause for obvious reasons. They are the poorest of the poor, burdened with family cares, in dismal health, lack education and training, have no awareness and are disempowered. Trapped in their state of isolation they have no contacts with other workers. Hence they lack collective bargaining capacity and social security. With long working hours — as many as 14 hours a day — and very low pay they are open to brutal exploitation.

So a strategy is needed to bring about change. In an interview with the American magazine The Nation, Egyptian feminist Nihal el Saadawi observed correctly, “You need collective power, and that is why we always organise and network. Organising is power.” This message has reached the women in Pakistan.

That is what home-based women workers are now trying to do with the help of civil society organisations. At the convention on April 11, the main demands were for the government to ratify C-177, recognise the rights of home-based workers to organise and bargain collectively, fix minimum wages, guarantee occupational safety, avoid health hazards and provide social security and maternal protection. They demanded the ratification of C-177 that the government has signed. The government has yet to stir but the convention was a clear demonstration of the will of women workers to organise themselves and fight for their rights.

They have set up their organisations all over the country which now work under an umbrella organisation, the Home Based Women Workers Federation (HBWWF) which has 4,000 members in Sindh alone. It has affiliations with the national trade unions. The Labour Education Foundation has arranged adult literacy classes for workers as the importance of education is now widely recognised.

These are positive signals. The slogans that were raised at the convention were assertive and reflected the workers’ aggressive mood. But they also made a political statement. A slogan popular with the audience was: ‘Jub tak aurat tung rahay gee/ Jang rahay gee jang rahay gee’ (‘As long as women are oppressed, they will be at war’).

The challenge for these workers is to make themselves heard by making themselves visible. As it is, workers do not enjoy all the rights they are entitled to under the numerous international agreements to which Pakistan is a signatory.

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P.S.

* From Dawn, 28th April, 2011:

<http://www.dawn.com/2011/04/28/oppression-of-women-workers.html>

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