

Expanding the existing horizon: economic independence & decision making power to women

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Abstract

Women are getting opportunities to join workforce in large number especially in the labour intensive industries due to factors such as demand for women workers to do low skilled monotonous work at low wage rates. Along with the focus on employment opportunities available to women and wages paid to them, one should go beyond these two aspects to analyze their real position within families. As has been observed and experienced, women were kept in isolation when it come the decision making power within families as this power was and still is kept in the hands of those who earn, i.e. men in the families.

This paper is based on the information gathered from small and medium scale garment industry workers in Ludhiana to analyze the extent of control women have on their wages and decision making power within their families. It is shown here that from the decision to take up paid work, wages earned and decision making within families, the power still prevails following the principles of patriarchal structure.

Keywords: Employment, wages, decision making power, women workers, male hegemony and family income

Introduction

It has been accepted that employment stands for economic security whereas unemployment for economic insecurity. Employment gives monetary value to work done by an individual whereas unemployment leads to non-monetary value to the work done by an individual. Employment leads an individual to public space of economic activities whereas unemployment leads to private space within individual's home. Employment and position in public sphere gives authority, though hierarchy exists in terms of how much authority one possesses over others, whereas unemployment links an individual to subjugation. Employment stands for decision making power whereas unemployment depicts non possession of decision making power within families. The above discussed importance attached to the employment is based on the structure of authority build over the centuries by men because it is the men who have remained active participants in the employment market.

This employment is associated with authority, security, economic independence and decision making power. Women themselves demanded their place in the public sphere of economic activities. To gain such access, first step is to have freedom to join workforce just like men. Workforce for many centuries was kept close for women as they were considered to be fit for doing nurturing and reproduction. This has resulted in the forced functional specification which made women completely dependent on men for their survival. This demand was supported by capitalists who wanted to cut the cost of production and organized activities of male workers. It has resulted in the 'feminization of labour'. The right to work led us to the right to equal pay for equal work to men & women workers.

The right of equal pay tries to bring equality at shop floor and within families but question to be raised here is that whether the opportunity to earn income by their own gives women workers access to the decision making power within families and sense of economic independence. This aspect of women and work will be presented in the following sections. This

paper is divided into three sections. First section throws light on the unquestioned practice of male control over decision making procedure within families. Second section brings to light the attitude of men towards working women and to the idea of women having decision making power. Third section discusses the prevalence of family income system that strongly influences the power of women to control their wages. Last section concludes the paper with concluding remarks.

Decision making power in family: Male Hegemony

The foremost question to be raised is that what is it that gives the male members of families a power to decide on matters related to the lives of other members, especially the women members?

Men have had access to the political, social and economic institutions whereas the women were not given access to such institutions. This resulted in the lack of awareness among women regarding the activities taking place outside their houses having impact on the lives of family members. Having access to such institutions made men as representatives of their families. Being the only link that joins the public sphere to the private sphere and vice versa, men communicate the information to and fro. This gave the power to men to take decisions with regard to families taking it as a single unit or entity. Though women now do have access to such institutions through various rights yet majority of them still have no power to make or even influence the decisions taken within families. This phenomenon is further strengthened by the attitude of women themselves regarding the existing male hegemony.

During interviews with women workers, women claimed that they do make decisions within their families. Probing further on the question about the matters on which they make decisions, they informed that they freely decide on matters relating to the things needed for home and family members. Since women are still largely to be considered suitable to do domestic work only, they are given power to make decisions related to such matters only. They live with the false sense of

authority possession which is given to them in order to avoid the direct conflict between men and women in families along with other facts as well. The power of decision making with them is secondary in nature because those decisions do not bring any change in the existing familial relations and male hegemony.

Further, the male hegemony is also based on the traditional norm of accepting men as the only breadwinners in the families. Since only men use to go out of their homes to earn, they were the only source from where all needs of women and their children were used to be fulfilled. Even though women have taken up the paid work, they are not looked upon as breadwinners in normal circumstances and hence they don't have the real power to make decisions.

The status of being secondary regarding the decision making is acceptable to all the respondents. They do not mind anything wrong with this practice. The absolute power to make decisions by women exists only in the absence of male head of their families. Women tend to attach their status and happiness with that of their husbands and fathers.

The following section brings out another reason of the absence of economic independence and decision making power to women workers.

Paid work by women: Male Perspective

Respondents of the interviews said that they have taken up the paid work with the permission and support of their husbands. The decision to send their women to take up the paid work along with other women and men in the public sphere on the part of the men is not the result of any change in the accepted norm of inequality between men and women, rather it has been made possible due to the rising pressure of fulfilling the needs and demands of family members at times of increasing cost of living with the income earned by men. The acceptance of new identity of women has not brought the societal acceptance of economic independence of these women and shift of power to make decisions from men to women within families.

Husbands of these workers and other men workers emphasized that women are allowed to take up the paid work as long as they find it difficult to survive on their earlier incomes. As soon as their economic crisis gets over, they ask their women to come back within their homes leaving behind their identity of worker. They all were very sure that the women will do the same without any hesitations and questions because their primary work is the domestic work. This intention on the part of men is made very clear to the women workers while giving them permission to join the workforce. Hence, they do not see themselves as workers equal to men workers having full control over their wages which could result in their economic independence. They see it as a passing phase in their lives. The decision of taking up a paid work in itself is not a decision taken up by women themselves.

It becomes the duty of women workers to maintain balance between their paid work at shopfloor and unpaid domestic work within their homes. Husbands do not want their women to neglect domestic duties at any cost. In addition, the wages paid to women workers are generally less especially lower than the wages of husbands. They cannot think of becoming economically independent having authority to challenge the existing status quo in the society. Further, husbands allow their women to take up paid work as long as they follow the

standards of morality expected from women in the society. It restricts their mobility and network which are considered to be essential to bring the change. Hence, husbands with the changing and pressing times have allowed their wives to come out from public space in order to participate in the public sphere has remained limited or narrow, i.e. the participation in economically worthy activities is highly mitigated by the husbands' adherence to socio-cultural traditional ideology that has not allowed women workers to become economically independent actors in true sense.

Following section discusses the principle of family income as a tool to restrict women achieving economic independence and affecting their decision making power within families.

Family income & economic independence of women workers

It has become evident that women do not enjoy economic independence as during interviews, all women respondents said that they give their entire wages in the hands of the male heads of their families which have to be either husbands in case of married women workers and fathers in case of unmarried women workers. They do not keep anything with themselves in order to spend as per their wishes. They all said that they ask for money whenever they need it and they usually are able to get that money. On asking about for the reasons they ask for money, majority of the respondents said that it is usually for either their children or anything necessary for their homes. This clearly indicates that these women do not have control over their wages. It is not to deny the fact that the wages earned by these women are very low yet it just has the power to improve the family income as a whole which help these families to meet their immediate needs. Hence, it becomes important to analyze the extent of control women possess over their wages.

It can be said that at times when survival of family becomes difficult, the demand for economic independence and decision making power for women seems to be irrelevant. But even in such harsh times when a man continues to have complete access to family income and decision making power then why women cannot have the same? They are the ones who compromise on their needs in order to fulfill the demands of other family members especially their children, which have become evident from what the respondents were saying regarding the importance of the future of their children. The demands for personal things by women workers are looked upon as luxury demands whereas men have the unquestioned power to spend out from family income on their specific needs, such as, alcohol.

Even after contributing in the family income, women workers do not possess any power to decide the monthly budget of their families. Prominently accepted practice of family income came to the light while interviewing the workers. The respondents, both men and women workers, said that it does not matter who control the family income as this income is used to meet the needs of all family members. This prevalence of family income is closely associated with the acceptance of male head playing the role of Finance Minister at home. This concept of family income is used as a tool to snatch away the fruits of labour of women so that they cannot lay claim on their wages demanding equality leading to the end of their subjugation.

The practice of family income is made to look peaceful as women respondents work with the permission granted by men and other senior members of families after giving assurance that they will follow the existing hierarchal structure of power within their families.

Conclusion

From interviews, various arguments can be identified which women and men workers offered in opposition of the full control of women over their wages thereby restricting the chance of them becoming economically independent having authority to influence the decisions within their families. Some of those views are:

- The wages earned by women are very small amount in comparison to men in family.
- Male heads have been organizing everything in families since ages; hence they know better how to spend money.
- Family income is followed where everyone pool their incomes. Hence women also have to give up their control over their wages.
- Women are not fully aware of what is going on outside their homes so they cannot make correct decisions.
- Women are supposedly fit for doing domestic work only related to which they usually get money and decision making power.

Those making above said arguments should consider themselves supporters of the existing status quo based on patriarchal structure of society which still is not ready to emancipate women from the shackles of subjugation and secondary status. What is striking in the above given arguments is the defensiveness for the existing status quo in the society.

If this situation remains rampant, surely one should work towards giving the full control of wages to women who earn it, rather than belittle the issue. Likewise, even if women workers are not disparaging, this repugnant practice of not controlling fruits of their labour, it should be stopped at once. The task is to go beyond the availability of employment opportunities and wage rates paid to these women workers. They must be made to realize that this practice is leading to the discrimination. Men always claim the control over not only their wages but also over the entire family income. It is not to claim that the control over the low wages will make the discrimination against women will disappear. But it is a necessary step towards building confidence in women. It will provide them access to not only family decision making power by breaking the gender based hierarchy but also widen their perspective when they will make decisions, they will have to take into account various social, political and economic factors. This will hopefully, help women to raise their voice about the issues affecting their wellbeing, wellbeing of their families and society at large.

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