

Hard Hit by the Crisis? Women Workers in Export Oriented Garments and Organised Retail Trade

Abstract

The common perception of financial crisis in India is that of a fairly fared economy which could overcome the shocks of the crisis through a comparatively good macro economic performance. Though this may be true at the macro level, the crisis seems to have hit differently the various sections of the population with the marginalised bearing the major brunt - resulting in a further economic and social polarisation. Women who are disproportionately concentrated in the informal economy are one of the worst affected categories. Notwithstanding this, so far, little scholarly attention has been paid either to capture the impact of the crisis on women and its implications on the economy at large. In this backdrop, the paper, apart from the analysis of macro data, focuses on two broad groups of women workers –garment industry and organised retail trade. The data sources include secondary data and published reports, besides field level insights from certain research work pertaining to the identified sectors. Based on the analysis of the macro data, the paper argues that the financial crisis has adversely affected overall female employment - as evident in a steep decline in women's work participation rates. The sectoral analysis shows that many women working in export oriented garments have become jobless or have forgone part of their wages or wage increases. Many also have joined the rank of unemployed with the shifting of industries, closing down of factories or retrenchment of women workers. Married women were the first to lose jobs though their income are critical for the survival of the families, especially during periods of rising food prices and increase in all cost of living expenses. Organised retail trade sector, which is largely domestic oriented, was also affected by the crisis, the signs of which are reflected in closing down of some of the outlets or in the poor business of many units. Women who constitute for a considerable number of retail trade workers at the floor level either lost jobs or had to surrender benefits within an already poor conditions of work. For those who are in employment are at the threat of dismissal and are forgoing many benefits which have direct impact on the survival of the families. The sectoral analysis, thus, reveals that women are stretching their work in order to compensate for job losses and resulting declines in overall household income. Furthermore, field level insights show that a significant proportion of women are forced to accept any job irrespective of lower wages and deplorable working conditions.

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