

Women Workers in Nepal's Popular Employment Sector

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Agriculture is the major employment sector, covering 76% of the employed labor force in Nepal. The available statistics show that 85.19 % of the total female workforce compared to 67.06 % of total male work force is engaged in this sector.

Women workers in agricultural sector are broadly divided into self-employed and wage employed workers. Self-employed woman workers are mainly unpaid family workers. Unpaid family workers have a custom called *parma*. Namely, in rural Nepali society, agriculture workers perform activities by exchanging labor with close relatives, friends who work together in their agricultural fields. Under the *parma* system, there will be no payment of wages to workers of neighborhood families. However, for the same number of days, workers from each of the families will equally work on each others' farmland.

Statistics show that over the last three decades, the labor force participation rate of women has increased due to women's increasing engagement in informal sectors. And according to a recent National Living Standard Survey, women's participation in the labor force is 71.3 %. However, there is gender discrimination in the informal employment sector. Biases against girls and women start at home and extend to our community and institutions. Patriarchal notions are further reflected in state policies and laws as well as in the entire legal system.

Sexual harassment is another alarming issue with both formal and informal enterprises. Moreover, sexual harassment is naturally more visible in the informal sectors of work. In addition, women from working families being trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation is very common.

Women right activists argue that because of gender insensitive political parties, the policies-programs and plans of the government and election manifestos are pro male. Also, feudal socio-economic relations are stronger among employers. And as long this mentality exists for female employment in the formal or informal sectors, women have to suffer severe discrimination.

According to the President of the Federation of Women Entrepreneurs' Association of Nepal (FWEAN) and the vice chairperson of the SAARC Chamber Women Entrepreneurs Council (SCWEC) Nepal, 500,000 women are self-employed in micro and medium level enterprises. And, most of the training provided to women is mostly traditional, such as, tailoring, crafts, cooking which are limited to home based businesses. Small scale and informal businesses contribute 77 % of the economy.

Some Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) officials advised that female run registered businesses is about 3,000, which is a very low number. And the reasons for non-involvement of women in entrepreneurship is the lack of education, exposure and credit. The situation is changing and the government has provided incentives to women in matters of subsidy and tax rebate. According to officials at Nepal Chamber of Commerce, there is a 50 per cent tax rebate for women entrepreneurs. Ironically, although there are many facilities for women, they still remain unaware of them.

Women workers in both formal and informal sectors are also organizing themselves into a trade union. In addition, they are carrying out NGO activities to make themselves more aware of various issues related to labor laws. Trade unions and the human right organizations are working towards shaping the efforts of government, employers' organizations and business oriented NGO groups for the improvement of working women's conditions.

Although non-governmental organizations are doing their share of work, government efforts in implementing existing policies and programs in favor of women entrepreneurs have not been effective. The government should not shy away from feasible initiatives to foster the spirit of women entrepreneurs in the country.



△ A working women as a security personnel of a department store