

Book Review

Praveen Jha, Avinash Kumar and Yamini Mishra (eds) (2020)
Labouring Women: Issues and Challenges in Contemporary India.
Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan. ISBN 9789390122073. 344 pp.
US\$35.87, ₹950 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Madhuri Kamtam, University of East Anglia, United Kingdom

The issue of women's employment and participation in the labour force is widely debated for a multitude of reasons. Neglecting women's unpaid labour and care work, the gender wage gap, undermining and under-reporting women's paid work in statistics are a few of the significant ones in the body of scholarship. The book *Labouring Women: Issues and Challenges in Contemporary India*, edited by Praveen Jha, Avinash Kumar and Yamini Mishra, makes a significant contribution to the domain of research on women's employment and labour force participation. For academic scholars in sociology, development studies, gender and economics, as well as decision-makers, this book is noteworthy.

The book has an introduction by the editors and twelve chapters written by seventeen different authors. The entire collection is well-written, interesting and covers a variety of labour-related issues. By concentrating on conceptual and methodological issues of women's labour, it seeks to address some of the key issues surrounding women's work. The contrasts between paid and unpaid labour, as well as between economic and non-economic activities in the labour market, are also highlighted and discussed. As has already been said, it is crucial to take the differences into account because a significant portion of women's unpaid labour is disregarded and invisible in statistics reports.

Each chapter in the book offers a comprehensive examination of a particular case study using both pertinent theory and a quantitative approach. The volume's introduction makes the case that the various elements of the intersection between the labour question and the women's question are of primary interest. All the chapters have a focus on comprehending the interconnection between paid and unpaid work, present alternative theories, and draw attention to methodological concerns related to women's labour market participation. From Jayati Ghosh's term "time poverty", which refers to women having little time for themselves, through discussions of care work, underpaid work, women domestic workers, land rights, common property resources and the role of public investment in boosting women's livelihoods, a wide variety of viewpoints are well combined in the book. Feminist scholarship, history, politics and sociology are all included since the economics discipline's interest in women and labour also makes these fields relevant.

This comprehensive book offers some remarkable insights. For instance, the World Economic Forum's (WEF) 2017 *Global Gender Gap Report* reveals that India has under-performed in areas like economic engagement, educational achievement and health status. The study's findings also indicate that women's participation rates in the labour force have decreased nationwide during the past forty years, which raises methodological issues with the data collected. In contrast to this

finding, the various chapters highlight some definite trends. For instance, the rise in women's unpaid work in the agricultural sector is caused by a shortage of paid employment opportunities in the labour market. One such example is the decline of work under India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and various issues around it regarding payment. The unpaid work in the self-employment sector is mostly done by women, and hence there is no decline in the female labour force participation if the paid and unpaid labour of the women is counted together. Examples of work in the self-employment sector include cultivation for one's own use or for the benefit of the household, various domestic and subsistence activities, etc.

The high levels of informality in relation to women's work is leading to their concentration in low-paid jobs which are invisible in the data sets. It is a concern that the question of informality is often limited to the question of visibility, and this raises concerns. In the introductory chapter, the editors point out the importance of women having a "voice" which can be achieved by promoting and using methods such as ethnographies, life histories and case studies rather than just confining the women's world of work to large-scale data sets. By using these approaches, women have a tremendous opportunity to share their stories and present themselves, which also helps explore how caste, class and ethnicity intersect for the women.

The book's authors offer a variety of ideas in their individual chapters to address numerous problems relating to women's labour, its measurement and areas where reforms are required for women's welfare and better living conditions. They contend that:

- (i) There is a need for a radical redistribution of surplus land that must be carried out in a gender-sensitive manner. To combat landlordism and advance equity, this is essential. The governance of shared property resources, access to public lands, and enough public investment for women farmers, together with land titling and joint titles with a right to natal and marital property, are all identified as current needs. [Smita Gupta, Chapter 11]
- (ii) There is a need for equitable resource management, which can only be accomplished by considering all the various socio-economic, political and cultural circumstances. It is vital to redefine some key concepts, such as development, common property resources and sustainable livelihoods in a way that is more political than merely descriptive. This will make it possible to challenge the underlying causes of economic marginalisation. [Sumi Krishna, Chapter 10]
- (iii) Exploitation occurs even in the digital commons, particularly on the Internet, which is controlled by a small group of capitalists and held in their hands. It is exploiting the unpaid labour of women in the Global South and extracting surplus from them. A historical-material approach that emphasises women's reproductive labour is necessary. In the age of the digital commons, a governance structure that promotes global democracy is essential. [Anita Gurumurthy, Chapter 12]
- (iv) More than 90 per cent of women work in the unorganised sector, where there is no job security or labour law protection, and working conditions are often precarious. Women's unpaid labour is neither compensated financially nor is it included in statistics. [Archana Prasad and S. Krithi, Chapter 6]
- (v) To support women, a fiscal policy that is progressive and has a greater tax-to-GDP ratio must be put in place. Given that public spending plays a significant role in macroeconomic development strategy, it is imperative that the government invest in supporting women's livelihoods. [Chirashree Das Gupta, Isha Ralli and Mohit Gupta, Chapter 4]

This book is well-written and covers a wide range of perspectives on how women work and participate in the labour market. However, in recent years, women's movements and their politics could have received greater attention and discussion. Understanding household labour relations could be effectively linked with these narratives. Given India's diversity, a broader investigation of discrimination and violence against women at work using the intersections of caste, gender and ethnicity may also be explored. This might improve discussions about women's work and the dichotomy between paid and unpaid labour.

Reference

World Economic forum (2017) *The Global Gender Gap Report 2017*. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report=2017> [accessed 21 May 2023].

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Madhuri Kamtam is a PhD researcher in the School of International Development at the University of East Anglia, United Kingdom. Her research interests include caste, gender, labour economics, the political economy of development and public policy. [Email: m.kamtam@uea.ac.uk]