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Gender, Labor, and Empowerment: The Lives of Women Porters in Darjeeling

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Abstract: In the 21st century, even with significant progress and advancements, women still encounter challenges and inequalities that undermine their confidence and self-worth. This paper delves into gender, labor, and empowerment, with a particular focus on the experiences of women in the workforce, shaped by social, cultural, and economic factors. The study focuses on the unique challenges faced by the women porters in Darjeeling, who undertake physically demanding tasks, carrying heavy loads and traversing uphill and downhill for several hours each day. While this occupation provides a source of economic independence, these women encounter numerous hurdles in the labor market. By examining their socio-economic circumstances, opportunities, challenges, and the impact of gender-based discrimination on their sense of empowerment, the study underscores the labor experiences of women porters in Darjeeling.

Keywords: Gender, Labor, Empowerment, Discrimination, Women Porters.

I. INTRODUCTION

Women are the foundation of humanity and the backbone of human civilization. They are the epitome of resilience, courage, and compassion. Women comprise the world's half population and play significant roles worldwide, ranging from caring for their families to building a nation. India's practicing patriarchal system has limited women's voices and opportunities, but they have pushed to fight for their rights and equality. Traditionally, women were only seen as managing the household chores and nurturing their children and families. Unfortunately, their efforts are still unnoticed and unrewarded, which limits their potential and opportunities. However, in the contemporary world, women are proving that they are not just made for household chores but can equally do things like men, breaking the gender stereotype with their resilience and education. Women actively participate in formal and informal labor markets, which are crucial to the global economy. The government regulates the formal sector, while the informal sector is not governed by government regulations, which lack social security, job benefits, and legal safeguards. Women who work in the informal sector encounter obstacles, yet they also experience certain freedoms and opportunities that influence their economic circumstances. There is a subset of women in this informal market whose participation has contributed significantly to their empowerment by encouraging financial independence and challenging traditional gender norms. They are the women porters of Darjeeling. In mainstream discussions about labor and empowerment in the informal economy of Darjeeling, women porters are often neglected. They take on physically demanding work, carrying

loads, luggage, and goods, and help with transportation in the labor market. These women work in a largely unregulated system and without legal protection. Yet, for them, this labor is not just a means of survival but also a gateway to empowerment and economic independence.

II. UNDERSTANDING PORTERING AS A FORM OF LABOR

Portering is the act of manually carrying loads or goods by the person. So, this form of labor also comes from a gendered context, as both men and women in Darjeeling are doing this labor. They carry the tourists' and locals' loads, goods, and luggage. Darjeeling, nestled in the Himalayan foothills, is renowned for its lush tea gardens, vibrant tourism, and rich cultural heritage. It is an economic and cultural hub, attracting visitors worldwide for its scenic beauty. Despite its prominence, many houses and hotels in Darjeeling are situated on hill slopes. They cannot be reached by road, or transportation cannot be accessed, making people rely upon porters as the primary means of transporting goods (Rai, 2024).

The people refer to the porters as bhariyas, coolie, and namley in Darjeeling, who provides manual labor services in exchange for low wages. They are mainly migrants from the neighboring country Nepal, hailing from the Thami community, recognized as an Other Backward Class in West Bengal. They carry loads of vegetables, LPG gas cylinders, and water cans on their backs in a doko, a bamboo basket secured with a strap known as a namlo (Chhetri, 2024). Since they are part of the Thami Community, they have their own language for communicating with each other, but they also speak Nepali Language for general communication. The male porters initially move to Darjeeling for job opportunities, and their wives and children follow them. This pattern illustrates a frequent pattern among numerous migrant bhariya couples: the husband leaves for work at a young age, while the women generally migrate only after marriage (Rai, 2024).

These migrant bhariyas do not own homes and usually live in rented rooms in Darjeeling town. Over 90 percent of the Nepalese porters working in Darjeeling come from Dolakha district in Nepal (Chhetri, 2015). Women have to migrate with men to do domestic chores and care for their husbands and children; however, as the husbands' income becomes insufficient, they also need to work with their husbands. With limited education, women cannot participate in formal employment; hence, they must enter the informal sector. The wives of male bhariyas serve as house helpers with minimum wage, or most become bhariyas with their husbands. In 2012, the Darjeeling Municipality ordered the porters to register themselves with a fee of Rs. 800 and a monthly tax of Rs 45. The municipality introduced the registration to maintain records, provide identification jackets, and address complaints against porters. However, the porters argued that the fees were unaffordable, with many earning an average of ₹5,000 per month (Chhetri, 2012). This reflects that the porters, who are immigrants from Nepal, face citizenship-related issues due to mandatory registration and identity verification requirements. The municipality emphasizes monitoring workers from different countries and serving as informal labor in the region. This highlights the precarious position of cross-border laborers, who play a crucial role in the local economy but remain vulnerable to exclusionary policies.

III. WOMEN AS PORTERS IN DARJEELING: AN INTRODUCTION

Women porters are the ones who take on labor-intensive work, often carrying heavy goods, loads, and luggage in the market, trekking routes for a minimal wage. These women are engaged in work typically dominated by men. Historically, portering was viewed as a men's job due to the physical strength required, but these women proved that gender cannot be differentiated on strength and capability. In Darjeeling, the emergence of women porters from the age group of 35-50 years shows that women are challenging the traditional gender stereotypes by taking on the traditionally male-dominated profession. The labor of these women porters is significant for the local market and people because they carry heavy loads over steep and rough paths, often in bad weather, making the work physically demanding. The constant lifting, bending, and walking on uneven surfaces result in long-term health issues, such as headaches, chronic back pain, and knee problems. They work long

hours, starting their day from 7 am till 6 pm, with no set schedule, and are usually paid little for their hard work. They have to balance both household chores and the job. Women Porters reported being unable to focus on their children and their studies. They migrated from Nepal with their husbands, leaving behind their families. Because of their profession, they cannot usually return to meet and spend time with their families. They are daily wage earners, and as reported by the women porters, they can earn up to Rs 300 to 500 a day except Thursday, as the market in Darjeeling is closed on that day. As a migrant from other countries, they cannot easily avail themselves of formal sector jobs, and because of their limited education, they are forced to work in minimal-wage jobs. Additionally, they frequently encounter a hostile work environment, mainly when dealing with tourists and customers for their charges.

IV. THE WORKSTATION OF THE PORTERS IN DARJEELING

They are often seen at the bustling market of Darjeeling and its adjoining places like the Goenka Petrol Pump, near the old supermarket, in the Gas agency office, and in the lane where vegetables are sold locally known as “*bichgalli*”. These places serve as workplaces to them. The male or female porters arrive at their station in the early morning to begin their tasks. Some are employed by shopkeepers who hire them to carry loads and deliver goods to their clients. As previously stated, Darjeeling features a hilly landscape where access to vehicles or other forms of transport is limited. Thus, reliance on Porter is necessary. Men bhariyas typically work at hardware and furniture stores, transporting heavy construction materials and furniture. Therefore, women porters carry vegetables, gas cylinders, and people's luggage or deliver goods to customers' homes. They work in the gas agency to deliver LPG gas cylinders from the distribution point to hotels, restaurants, and homes around 7-8 weighing 30 kg. The women porters employed by the shopkeepers receive payment directly from customers, or in some cases, customers pay the shopkeeper for the carrying fee and then get reimbursed by them. However, some women porters operate independently and must wait for customers; they charge their rate based on the location's distance. The women porters who work independently earn less than those employed in a shop because they have to seek out customers; some work in a gas cylinder agency to deliver gas to hotels and houses, and they get paid as per their trip.

V. GENDER DYNAMICS IN PORTERING

The gender dynamics in Portering reflect the intersection of labor, societal norms, and economic roles. Societal expectations and cultural norms have determined the division of labor. Women have always been expected to play their roles within the domestic sphere, while men have been expected to engage in the labor market outside the home. However, the economic conditions in Darjeeling have opened a space for women to work in various informal sectors. Cultural expectations surrounding femininity and masculinity significantly affect the types of jobs available to women, but they take on these jobs gracefully.

Despite their essential role in the workforce, the social status of porters, especially women, needs to be recognized in the mainstream, leading to their marginalization. They are paid less than their male counterparts, even carrying the same weight (Rubery J, & Grimshaw D, 2009). Women porters often face discrimination at work and in their personal lives because the job of portering is considered a low-status job, as traditional ideas about gender roles still shape what is expected of them at home and in the workforce. In many households, women porters are the primary earners or an essential source of income for their families, and the income they generate is insufficient for basic sustenance.

Though it is a physically challenging job, it still gives women porters a sense of self-empowerment and financial independence, especially in regions with limited employment opportunities. Women's empowerment is crucial to attaining gender equality. It involves boosting a woman's self-esteem, enhancing her decision-making power, expanding her access to opportunities and resources, giving her control over her life at home and in society, and enabling her to create change (Peace

Corps, n.d). Their labor is both empowering and exploitative because they carry loads ranging from 10-80 kilograms; depending on the type of goods, they often walk several kilometers a day without any safety measures. In the age of feminism, only a few women in India have attained the freedom to make choices and live their lives. However, many women nationwide still need more support (Kapur & Narayan, 2020). People frequently deny women access to basic education in rural and semi-urban regions. They are forbidden to pursue higher education despite having the potential to do so (hindrise, n.d.). Even when Indian women secure employment, they often receive less pay than their male counterparts. Since women are more likely to be employed in informal sectors rather than formal ones, many find themselves facing this wage disparity. Their pay should be higher, considering the long hours and hard physical work. Despite these challenges, portering provides a way for women to become financially independent, help with household expenses, send their children to school, and sometimes save money.

VI. RESILIENCE AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN PORTERS

With their strength and determination, women porters navigate the challenges of demanding physical labor along with social and economic obstacles. They work for the betterment of their families, some as sole earners, and some supporting their husbands. Their empowerment is essential factor in enhancing the quality of life and promoting gender equity. They exhibit tremendous resilience, drawing power from necessity and responsibility. However, they encounter a lack of social recognition for their labor, health risks from physical labor, and rampant gender disparities. Many women juggle the dual responsibilities of their jobs and domestic duties. This resilience is a testament to their commitment to survival and a better life. Resilience alone is not enough to uplift them. Economic empowerment is the first step of critical importance. Education and vocational training should come hand in hand for their empowerment. Since most of them lack formal education, it deprives them of opportunities to improve their lives. The literacy program and training will enhance the ability to earn and lessen their labor-intensive burdens. This will not only improve financial stability but also boost self-esteem and self-worth. Empowering women's porters means building opportunities for them to succeed, not merely survive.

VII. CONCLUSION

The lives of women porters in Darjeeling show the complex relationship between gender, labor, and empowerment in the informal sector. These women, who take the job of physical labor intensive and are socially looked down upon, can show strength and self-determination for better lives. They challenge the traditional gender norms of working outside their comfort and challenge the societal perception of the capabilities of women shaped by patriarchal values. The women porters have to encounter extreme challenges. From dawn to dusk, they must be in their workplace waiting for the customers, bargaining for their wages; some work for shopkeepers, delivering the goods to their houses. As they do not have any organization, they must address all the issues they face. They have to walk steeply uphill and downhill several times a day with heavy loads on their head that affect their health; they have health issues like back pain, headache, knee pain, and body aches. They have to work even in the extreme weather conditions of heavy monsoons and chilled winters for their daily wage. All this perpetuates cycles of exploitation and insecurity.

Despite all the challenges, it provides a pathway for them to economic independence. These women can invest in their children's education or support their husbands through earnings. In doing this, they help their families and enable future generations to live life beyond the constraints of poverty and gender expectations. Their life experiences emphasize the need for structural changes, such as policies or cooperative organizations to support the informal sector workers to ensure fair wages. Empowerment means not only their economic independence but also redefining their societal roles and challenging structural inequalities. By addressing their issue, society can recognize the essential roles of the women porters and work towards a more inclusive future.

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