

NO SPACE FOR WORK

Project Report, June 30 2020

OUTCOMES

The project proposed to develop a framework that allows us to go beyond seeing violence only as an interpersonal issue, incorporates the political economy perspective and can be used by all stakeholders. This framework was expected to evolve alongside the consultations, workshops and follow up participative research collection, in order to incorporate the theoretical understandings of women's visible and invisible labour while documenting the lived realities of women's working lives. As planned, consultative meetings were undertaken with feminist academics, economists, unionists, archivists, women's collectives, etc. — from different sectors and (physical and social) locations.

These meetings helped in strengthening earlier partnerships, building new solidarities and creating a feminist network that works on equitable principles of knowledge sharing, collection and information dissemination. The first year of the project laid out the basic idea of a framework that looks at the women's work in an inclusive, intersectional way, incorporates violence (mental, physical, economic, caste, structural, etc.) and its effects on visible and invisible labour. The consultative meetings also added to our understanding of the structural violence in the framework of women's labour and also permeates local customs and practice, to enable the most exploitative and extractive labour to be performed.

Two background papers — one, looking at the history of women's work and placing it, the visible and the invisible parts, within a neoliberal economy (by Sumangala Damodaran, Professor, School of Development Studies, Ambedkar University Delhi) and the second, analysing the inherently violent nature of exploitative work that women are forced to do (by Madhu Bhushan, independent researcher and activist and core group member of SIEDS, Karnataka) — are currently at the review stage. The first draft of the papers have been received by the Zubaan team. The papers were supposed to incorporate the learnings from the workshops, the unavoidable rescheduling of which has affected the timeline of the papers. Due to the postponement of the workshops (detailed below) and the changing nature of women's work in the face of the pandemic and the looming economic crisis, the papers will be reworked keeping real time concerns and emerging issues in mind. Another module, designed by Maraa - Media and Arts Collective, Bangalore, which was commissioned to supplement the research collection and provide a guideline which includes feminist ethics of research, confidentiality of respondents, etc. will be provided to all groups and partner researchers. In light of the current pandemic situation, this module is likely to evolve differently as collection of data, quantitative and qualitative, is set to change in a socially and physically distanced world.

Apart from the background papers and the module, a call for papers from researchers, and activists in the specific areas of study and location in order to contextualize the collection of data within the existing economic, social and legal framework will be released in the next reporting period.

This period also helped build linkages with women's unions, collectives, research groups and on-ground activists which will help us work through the project goals collectively. Some of these collaborations have already begun through workshops, research design and planning while others are in various stages of project planning. These meetings have also helped in identifying literature and research gaps. For example, the multiple meetings with garment unions (GATWU and GLU), Alternative Law Forum, etc. in Bangalore helped us realize that a lot of research work on women's

labour and rights in the garment sector has already been conducted or is in process. Due to this, we decided to not focus on women in the garment sector and reallocate those resources to looking at newer and less researched forms of women's work.

—Through MAKAAAM (Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch), we've built partnerships with two Gujarat-based women farmers unions, The Working Group of Women for Land Ownership (WGWLO) and UTTHAN. The first workshop on women's work in agriculture and allied activities was conducted in partnership with these two unions in Ahmedabad, Gujarat and planning for the next steps and research design are underway.

—Another developing partnership to focus on women's work in agriculture is with Hyderabad-based Gramya Resource Centre for Women, run by V Rukmini Rao. This collaboration follows from the initial project planning that hopes to look at similar sectoral work in different locations.

—We've also partnered with SIEDS Collective (Society for Informal Education and Development Studies) in Karnataka. The workshop held with them brought together women working in multiple sectors (domestic work, construction, street vendors, beedi workers, etc.) and helped develop newer partnerships with unions (for example, Stree Jagruti Samiti which focuses primarily on domestic work).

—In Assam, we've followed a different model of reaching out directly to workshop participants through pre-existing networks (for healthcare workers comprising of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers and Auxiliary Nurse and Midwives (ANM)) and partnering with a feminist organization Nething and its sister organization, Women's Leadership and Training Centre (WLTC). We were hoping to include healthcare workers and informal women workers in Guwahati for this workshop, which was postponed due to the lockdown.

—Aajeevika Bureau, a Rajasthan-based organization working on migrant rights, are also onboard as partners to conduct workshops and research on migrant women workers and adolescent girls working in specified districts in Rajasthan.

—Conversations with Building and Wood Worker's International, Delhi (for construction and allied activities) and National Domestic Workers Union, Delhi, was also taking place but are currently suspended due to the external situations detailed below.

The collaborations, workshops, meetings and widespread networking are also conducive to building translatable, accessible, relevant and replicable materials which will be developed keeping the research questions most pertinent to the location and sector in mind, usability and sharing of the material in those locations based on partner feedback and creating a nuanced body of knowledge that will support feminist organizing and mobilization, especially against the onslaught of a crashing economy whose faultlines are laid bare by the pandemic. The research outcomes, therefore, will remain as a work in progress, as we incorporate the initial questions of the effect of structural violence on women's work while also taking into account the ongoing changes that will shape a post-COVID-19 world of women's work and labour, especially for marginalized communities.

ACTIVITIES:

The initial months of the project were dedicated to planning and structuring of the project's activities, as well as getting in touch with activists, researchers and academics whose work within the sphere of gender and labour intersected significantly with the project's goals. This was to originally culminate in a group consultation with a set of such advisors to propose the project's plans and get feedback. Due to logistical difficulties, we were unable to gather a significant majority of these advisers, and as we were more concerned with the value of their individual contributions than the setting, we adapted quickly to individual consulting meetings. These conversations shaped the project's methodology, its research aims, and created the networks required on the ground.

Project funds allowed the project team to travel to various locations to have these face-to-face meetings, and also allowed those outside of the city (Delhi) to travel to us for in-depth face-to-face meetings. Those which could not be coordinated in person were conducted over video conference. Later in the project, project funds allowed for consultations with project partners before the actual workshops, which became a necessity as the project's aims evolved and were fleshed out.

The project also commissioned three research works, two of which focus on the expansion of the 'workplace', 'work', and what is considered 'violence', and how these interlinked ideas are affected by the neocapitalist economy, state and patriarchal interests. The third work is designed as a module for participant researchers and for the project itself, to work through the issues of representation of women's stories as they continue to live lives of precarity and violence. This was visualised as being implemented as a part of the second round of workshops scheduled in the project activities, and will now be reworked into the project's functioning during the pandemic.

The first round of workshops was organised in Gujarat (Ahmedabad) and Karnataka (Bangalore), with the help of project partners in each location (WGWLO and SIEDS respectively). We were able to provide full support to all participants and trainers for travel, board and lodging, and facilitation, thanks to workshop funds. In addition, consultative meetings for the planning of further workshops in New Delhi, Rajasthan and Assam were fully supported, before the citizenship protests made workshops impossible in many locations, after which the Delhi pogrom and the pandemic took place.

After the completion of the first two workshops, a materials coordinator was contracted to look at the workshop learnings and the papers in progress, and adapt those resources to materials that could be useful for both active research work and planning for participant researchers, and also look at wider dissemination to a lay audience. This work is in progress at the time of submission of this report.

WHAT HAPPENED

- As expected: One of the project's initial understandings was to build strong linkages with those who would eventually become stakeholders and researchers in the project. To this end the first six months were spent reaching out, conducting smaller meetings and finalizing preliminary groups, organizations, unions and locations.
- Differently: The planned regional convention to formulate a draft research plan and to bridge the gaps in our proposal was put on hold following consultations with partners. This was replaced by focussed group discussions with individuals on project plans, research methodologies, resource sharing. This helped us sharpen the project focus based on individual learnings, e.g. identifying different sectors in each location to highlight key issues such as migration, race, caste against a gender backdrop.
- As planned: Multiple research formats for every sector and specific location were evolved to arrive at a coherent understanding of the structural inequalities in the world of women and work. As planned, we commissioned two background studies looking at the intersections of women, work and violence and an additional module to supplement the the research and provide guidelines on ethical, feminist participative research. All three documents are currently under review.
- Differently: Our plan for the background papers to develop as part of the research methodology workshops, including the learnings and responses to women workers and collectives on the ground, was postponed due to the factors discussed below.
- As planned: We reached out to newer partners (Rajasthan) in early 2020 and multiple workshops were planned at the end of the financial year 2019-20. Multiple recce meetings

had been conducted as a part of the follow up and engagement strategy and the Assam workshop with grassroots healthcare workers was planned for late March 2020.

- Impact of external context: Since December 2019, the country saw political upheavals and a global pandemic that affected the geographical locations, sectors, partner organizations and the women workers/unions we are working with. After the first workshop in Ahmedabad (Gujarat) in November 2019, planning was underway for workshops at Bangalore (Karnataka), Guwahati (Assam) and Delhi. However, with the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 in early December, strong protests in Assam resulted in curfew and internet shutdown. We held the Bangalore workshop with domestic workers, construction workers, sanitation workers, street vendors, beedi workers, etc. during the early days of the protest in mid-December 2019. The February violence in Delhi also impacted the planning process as participants and unions we were engaging with were affected by the violence and also involved in relief and rehabilitation of the affected.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown in March 2020, we decided to postpone the workshops (Assam) keeping in mind the vulnerability of the participants (primary healthcare workers) and overall safety and logistical concerns. All partners and grassroots organizations were notified not to conduct any project related work that jeopardized their health and safety. (3357)

One of the initial understandings of the project was to invest time in building linkages with those who would eventually become stakeholders and researchers in the project. To this end, the first six months were spent reaching out, conducting smaller meetings and finalizing preliminary groups, organizations, unions and locations. The planned regional convention to formulate a draft research plan and to bridge the gaps in our proposal and planning stages was put on hold following consultations with partners. We then proceeded with focused group discussions with individuals. This involved overall project feedback, research methodology, sharing of resources (academic, contacts, etc.) and also contributed to sharpening the project focus based on individual learnings, for example, identifying the sector in each location to highlight the primary issue — migration, race, caste, etc. against a gender backdrop.

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LEARNING AND ADAPTING

Our learnings span every aspect of the work: the research questions, the formats we had chosen, how to incorporate existing knowledge into our framework, and in many cases where the most support, both financial and otherwise, is needed.

1. While initially we planned a convention of activists, researchers and academics involved with questions of women and work, this turned out to be inadequate for both the level of engagement and the logistical challenges. One of our first learnings was to go to where the knowledge and experience were, so to speak, instead of asking those making it to come to us. This resulted in much more responsive and responsible links with resource persons.

2. This also followed in the implementation of the main research activity, the workshops to involve and train participative researchers. More often than not, connections for the same had to be built on the ground far in advance, and filtered through the work that our project partners were already engaged in, as these helped create a much deeper and respectful engagement with participants. This required more time and travel by the project team, and workshops began a few months later than our initial timeline proposed.

3. At each location specificities were quickly discovered, with the help of our resource persons and later our project partners. This led us to adopt an approach of complete flexibility in how to structure partnerships, schedule and administer workshops, commission materials, and how to mobilise existing networks to identify researchers. In Ahmedabad we began with representatives of various groups, themselves involved in research on women and agricultural work, including worker activists, and we had a single facilitator to guide the group. In Bangalore, where unions are stronger in our focus groups (domestic workers, home-based workers, and street vendors), participative research could be launched in the workshop itself, and a collaborative approach allowed for multiple facilitators and smaller, directed sessions. We strove to break away from singular and simplistic overarching formats, and leaned into the specificity of experience of each group.

4. A starting goal was to begin dissemination of materials early in the year. Early into the consultations, it became clear that while there was a lot of material on women and work, it would take much more to hone that material into useful dissemination tools that asked the questions our project wants to. As the workshops too began later, our own research took until November to take hold, very quickly to be followed by the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019-2020, the communal violence in Delhi, and the COVID-19 pandemic, completely changing the face of information dissemination and communication itself.

5. These past four months of the year, as well as the workshops before them, illustrated how crucial partner organisations are for any enterprise such as ours, how few resources are actually available to many grassroots workers, and how women workers, especially in minority communities, are at an intersection of extreme danger in the face of a collapsing democracy and a world health crisis. One of our main priorities now is to support and bolster these organisations- and individuals-turned-relief-networks, who were already and continue to be crucial actors in any kind of research with, support of, and advocacy alongside historically disadvantaged and marginalised groups.

INTERNAL CHANGES

As mentioned earlier, the citizenship protests and the emergence of women as the face of sit-in protests, most of the groups and research participants we were in touch with (or hoped to engage with) as part of the participative research process were unable to allocate time or resources for the project. According to our project plan, we spent the early half of the project building these connections which would lead to the basic essence of the project — qualitative data collection from working women researchers and collaborators — but the timeline of the project was massively affected due to political developments. It also affected the projects team capacity to actively follow up and work during the latter half of the year as locations and resources became increasingly inaccessible.

The protests also laid bare one of the primary questions we were addressing — how the world of women and work is also connected to the question of identity and citizenship — and we had to work keeping in mind that the research areas we were working in were changing at a rapid pace. As we tackled the research methodology and building of a research framework, we were acutely aware of the transient nature of the base we are building the research on as it was liable to change at every moment as more structural issues of inequality, gender and labour were being laid bare due to the discriminatory laws and practices (even going against international conventions).

With the Delhi violence in late February and the beginning of the pandemic in March, the team experienced internal as well as external changes in working within affected communities, women who were actively marginalized and losing their livelihoods, gendered violence in relation to public spaces and domestic spaces (for the pandemic and lockdown). One of the primary concerns was in working in these communities against growing precarity and marginalization, and evolving a responsible, feminist intervention.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

The project's research aims were formulated with India's population of working women in mind, which spans the caste system both within Hindu traditions and outside of it, a number of majority and minority religions, and ethnicities, and also a diversity of gender and sexuality experience, all tied up in a struggling 'developing' economy that leaves destitute those whose labour props it up. As such, goals of equity and inclusion are inherent in the formulation of such a proposal, and a mapping of diversity crucial to the applicability of its learnings.

The most significant building block of these goals was to adapt to, and develop, a model of research where the researcher is not a mediator of the lived experience of the 'subject'. While the debate about 'objectivity' in social science research is still ongoing,, we see the value in the lens of data collection being wielded by a person with comparable or similar socio-economic experience to those willing to narrate their stories. This has potential not only to upend the traditional power imbalance between researcher and researchee, but for a sharper and more three-dimensional image overall. Thus our workshop structure seeks to equip attendees with the ability to conduct participatory research within their own communities.

As this is a national-level project, another significant hurdle/opportunity was the diversity of language across project locations. The medium of the workshops as well as the research was, in the workshops we were able to conduct before the pandemic, tailored to the languages spoken by those in each group, and facilitators pulled from the same language groups. Materials were provided in translation from English. As well, the background papers and module that have been developed as project tools will be translated to all the first languages used by participants. In locations or situations where literacy cannot be a given, materials were explained orally and will later be provided in accessible forms.

The need to tailor all engagements, including workshops, to the varied population to whom they mean to appeal was a driving force in our relationships with partner NGOs as well. These partnerships have been forged with organisations and networks who themselves have a long history of engagement with minority communities, be they caste minorities, religious minorities or elseways, and whose work has always been informed by the necessity of inclusivity. The terms of our understanding were always created with this in mind, and we institutionally defer to the advice of partners, and participants, in our decision-making in how, and why, to work.

We hold these values when deciding what deliverables should be created, in how project materials can and will be used, and in the level of control and project knowledge to which participant researchers are privy, so that the stakeholders and the advisory team that keep our work on its path are not a group of 'experts' in the field, but one among the entirety of the experts of the field in which we work.

CREATIVE COMMONS

The grant products are still in progress and a framework for dissemination between project partners in different locations, multiple formats and languages for grant products, production of material in an ethical, feminist and safe way (a module to guide production is also being developed) is currently in process. As mentioned in the grant terms, the products/materials are being developed under the Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International terms of licensing, except for the exempted books/essays.