

Unheard Leaders: Rethinking Women's Informal Leadership in India's Unorganised Sector

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ABSTRACT

Women make up more than half of the workers in India's vast unorganised sector, yet very little of what is written about them treats them as leaders. Most existing research looks at street vendors, domestic workers and home-based artisans through the lens of hardship: low pay, no legal cover, harassment, and constant insecurity. This is not wrong, but it is incomplete. It leaves out a quieter story that plays out every day in markets, homes and workshops across the country, where women settle disputes among co-workers, teach newcomers the tricks of the trade, bargain with contractors and municipal staff, and hold together informal networks that function as a safety net when nothing else does. This paper argues that these everyday acts deserve to be called leadership, even though they carry no title and appear on no organisation chart. Drawing on feminist political economy and intersectionality theory, and building on a research design originally prepared for consideration under the Indian Council of Social Science Research's Women-Led Development scheme, the paper develops a conceptual framework for studying leadership as it is actually practiced by women in informal work. It reviews the relevant literature on informal labour and gender in India, identifies where that literature falls short, and lays out a qualitative, comparative methodology capable of capturing leadership across three occupational groups: street vending, domestic work, and home-based artisanal work. The paper closes by considering what recognising this kind of leadership could mean for policy, particularly for programmes built around the idea of Women-Led Development and the government's Viksit Bharat @2047 agenda. The central claim is a simple one: before India can talk seriously about women leading development, it needs to notice the leadership that women in the informal economy are already providing.

Keywords: informal sector, women's leadership, Women-Led Development, intersectionality, unorganised workers, India, feminist political economy

INTRODUCTION

Walk through any Indian city in the early morning and the informal economy is already at work. Vegetable sellers are laying out their produce before the municipal van arrives to move them along. Domestic workers are catching buses to their first house of the day. Women stitching garments at home are already at their machines, having started before the rest of the household woke up. None of this activity shows up in employment statistics the way a factory shift does, and none of the women doing it carry a business card that says "leader." Yet a closer look at how these workspaces actually function tells a different story. Someone decides how the vendors on a particular pavement will share space. Someone teaches a new domestic worker how to handle a difficult employer. Someone in the home-based workshop keeps track of who is behind on an order and quietly picks up the slack. That someone is, more often than not, a woman, and what she is doing looks a great deal like leadership, even if nobody calls it that.

India's informal or unorganised sector is not a marginal part of the economy; it is the economy for most working people. The great majority of the country's workforce earns a living outside the reach of labour law, provident funds, written contracts or paid leave. Women are heavily represented within this workforce, and national-level data compiled by the International Labour Organization indicate that women make up more than half of India's unorganised workers, even though they remain a minority within informal employment worldwide (International

Labour Organization, 2018). This is a striking fact, and it deserves more attention than it usually receives. Public conversation about these women tends to settle quickly into a single register: vulnerability. They are spoken of as workers who need protecting, as beneficiaries of welfare schemes, as a category to be surveyed and counted. All of this is true as far as it goes. What is missing is any serious acknowledgement that many of these women are also organisers, negotiators, mentors and problem-solvers within their own occupational worlds.

This paper grew out of a research proposal originally prepared for the Indian Council of Social Science Research's special call on Women-Led Development, commemorating the legacy of Punyashloka Devi Ahilyabai Holkar. The proposal set out to study women street vendors, domestic workers and home-based artisans in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, using life-history interviews, focus groups and participatory mapping to document leadership practices that usually go unrecorded. Although that particular funding application was not successful, the intellectual case it made has, if anything, grown stronger with time, and the argument deserves to be placed before a wider academic audience. This paper therefore restates and develops that case as a conceptual contribution: it does not report field data, since no fieldwork has yet been conducted, but it does something a proposal cannot do, which is to work through the theory, the literature and the policy stakes in enough depth to make a persuasive claim in its own right, and to set out a methodology that other researchers, or the present author with future funding, could use to carry the enquiry forward.

It is worth being honest about what this kind of study can and cannot claim to know in advance. Nobody has yet gone out and systematically asked several dozen street vendors, domestic workers and home-based artisans whether, and how, they see themselves organising, mentoring or negotiating on behalf of others. What can be done, in the meantime, is careful conceptual and theoretical groundwork: reading the existing scholarship closely enough to see where it stops short, building a framework sturdy enough to guide fieldwork once it becomes possible, and being clear about why the question is worth asking in the first place. That is the task this paper sets itself. It is, in other words, a paper about how to see something that has not yet been properly looked for, rather than a report on what was found once the looking began.

There is also a broader disciplinary point worth making at the outset. Development studies and gender studies in India have each, in their own way, become comfortable with certain default subjects. Development studies tends to default to the state, the market, or the formally organised institution as the unit that "leads" change. Gender studies, when it turns to leadership, tends to default to women in politics, in senior management, or in registered civil society organisations. Both defaults are reasonable, given how much easier it is to study something that keeps records of itself. But both defaults also mean that a very large number of Indian women, those working informally and without any organisational letterhead, fall outside the frame almost by definition. This paper is an attempt to widen the frame, not by inventing a new population to study, but by asking a different question of a population that has already been studied a great deal, from a different angle.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the existing literature on informal work and gender in India, tracing how leadership has been written about, or more often left out, in studies of street vending, domestic work and home-based production. Section 3 sets out the theoretical framework, built around feminist political economy, intersectionality and a broadened understanding of everyday leadership. Section 4 identifies the specific gaps this paper is trying to address. Section 5 lays out a proposed research design for future empirical study, including sampling strategy, data collection methods and ethical considerations. Section 6 discusses the paper's contribution to existing knowledge and what is distinctive about the approach taken here. Section 7 discusses what recognising informal women's leadership could mean for policy, with particular reference to Women-Led Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. Section 8 concludes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The informal economy as a field of study

The academic study of informal work owes a great deal to Keith Hart's early fieldwork in Accra, which gave the term "informal sector" its first proper airing and drew attention to the income-generating activity happening outside regulated employment (Hart, 1973). Hart's contribution was to insist that this activity was not simply

disguised unemployment; it was a functioning economic system with its own logic, even if that logic was invisible to conventional labour statistics. This insight has held up remarkably well. Half a century later, the informal economy remains the primary source of livelihood for most of the world's workers, and nowhere more so than in South Asia.

In India specifically, Jan Breman's long-running ethnographic work in Gujarat gave the field some of its most durable concepts, including the idea of "footloose labour": workers cut loose from any stable relationship with land, employer or place, and forced into a life of casual, insecure work (Breman, 1996). Breman's account is unsparing about the structural violence built into informal labour markets, and it remains an essential reference point for anyone studying precarity in India. Its limitation, for the purposes of this paper, is that it has comparatively little to say about how workers, and particularly women workers, exercise agency and leadership within these harsh conditions. The picture that emerges is one of exploitation absorbed and endured, rather than negotiated and managed.

Martha Chen's work with the global research and advocacy network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing has done more than perhaps any other body of scholarship to correct this imbalance, at least with respect to voice and visibility. Chen's writing treats informal workers, and informal women workers in particular, as a constituency with interests that can be organised, represented and negotiated on the world stage (Chen, 2012). WIEGO's decades of work with organisations such as India's Self-Employed Women's Association have shown that informal workers are entirely capable of building collective institutions when given the chance. This literature is closer to the spirit of the present paper, but it still tends to locate leadership within formal collectives, unions and federations. Less has been said about leadership that happens outside any such structure, exercised by an individual woman among her peers on an ordinary working day.

Occupation-specific literature

Street vending has attracted a reasonably rich literature in India, much of it associated with Sharit Bhowmik, whose comparative review of vending across Asian cities remains a standard reference (Bhowmik, 2005). This body of work documents in useful detail the harassment vendors face from municipal authorities and police, their precarious claim to public space, and the informal systems of mutual protection and information-sharing that vendors build among themselves to cope. Women vendors appear throughout this literature, but usually as a sub-category defined by additional vulnerability, such as exposure to sexual harassment, rather than as a group whose informal organising deserves separate examination.

Domestic work in India has been studied extensively by scholars such as Neetha N., whose research has traced the growth of paid domestic labour, its overwhelmingly female and often caste-marked character, and the almost complete absence of legal protection for those who do it. This literature is invaluable for understanding the structural position of domestic workers, but its emphasis, understandably, falls on exploitation and the case for regulation, rather than on the informal solidarity, mentoring and dispute-resolution practices that domestic workers themselves report using to manage difficult employers and negotiate better terms.

What both the street vending and domestic work literatures share, despite looking at very different working environments, is a tendency to treat the women concerned primarily as subjects of a policy problem rather than as actors within their own working communities. Street vending studies ask how the state should regulate vendors more fairly; domestic work studies ask how the law should be extended to cover a workforce it currently excludes. Both questions are important and this paper does not dispute their value. But answering them requires knowing something about how vendors and domestic workers already organise themselves informally, information that these literatures, focused as they are on the relationship between worker and state or worker and employer, do not set out to collect.

Home-based work, including artisanal production, has been examined by researchers including Ratna Sudarshan and Naila Kabeer, whose collaborative work has looked closely at how home-based women workers are woven into supply chains that keep them invisible even as they generate real value (Kabeer, Milward and Sudarshan, 2013). This literature has also drawn attention to a form of double invisibility particular to home-based work:

because the work happens inside the home, it disappears not only from official labour statistics but often from the awareness of neighbours and even close relatives, who may know a woman is "doing some stitching" without understanding it as employment at all. This has an obvious bearing on leadership. A woman who organises several other home-based workers to negotiate better piece rates from a contractor is doing something that is, almost by construction, harder to observe than a street vendor doing the equivalent, since the entire activity takes place behind closed doors and inside what is officially private, domestic space. Renana Jhabvala's long association with SEWA has produced an important body of writing on how women workers across these occupational categories can be organised into cooperatives and unions, most notably in the edited volume she produced with Sudarshan and Jeemol Unni, which placed the informal economy at the centre of development debate rather than at its margins (Jhabvala, Sudarshan and Unni, 2003). This is closer still to the argument of the present paper, since SEWA's own history demonstrates that leadership can and does emerge from within the ranks of informal women workers. Even here, though, the leadership that gets documented is mostly the leadership of women who go on to hold formal positions within SEWA or a comparable organisation. The leadership of women who never join any formal collective, and who lead only within their own street, lane or workshop, remains comparatively undocumented.

Leadership, agency and the language used to describe women's work

A separate strand of literature, less specific to India but directly relevant to this paper's argument, concerns how leadership itself is defined. Guy Standing's account of the "precariat," a class defined by chronic insecurity across many forms of casual and informal work, is a useful reminder of how easily the language of class and vulnerability can crowd out any discussion of agency (Standing, 2011). Naila Kabeer's influential framework for understanding women's empowerment, built around the three linked ideas of resources, agency and achievements, offers a more promising vocabulary, because it treats agency, defined broadly enough to include negotiation and even quiet resistance, as a central and measurable part of empowerment rather than an afterthought (Kabeer, 1999). Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, developed originally in the context of anti-discrimination law in the United States, has since become indispensable across the social sciences for understanding how overlapping identities of caste, class, religion and gender combine to shape a person's room for manoeuvre (Crenshaw, 1989). Applied to India's informal economy, this framework helps explain why a Dalit domestic worker and a upper-caste home-based artisan, though both technically "informal women workers," may face very different constraints on their ability to lead, be heard, or be believed.

A shift already under way: from victims to agents

It would be unfair to suggest that no one has noticed this gap at all. A slower shift has been taking place within development economics more generally, moving away from a picture of the informal worker as a passive victim of exclusion and towards a picture that pays closer attention to survival strategy and agency. This shift is visible, in different ways, in both Hart's original insistence that informal income generation is a system with its own logic rather than mere disorder, and in later work that has tried to take informal workers seriously as economic actors making calculated decisions under difficult constraints rather than simply absorbing whatever the market and the state hand down to them. This paper's argument sits within that broader shift, but it tries to push it one step further, from agency in the narrow economic sense of decision-making about work and income, to agency in the fuller social sense of organising, mentoring and leading others.

A second point worth drawing out concerns method rather than theory. Much of the strongest existing writing on informal work in India, Breman's included, is ethnographic in the classic sense: long fieldwork, close observation, and an interpretive style that puts the researcher's own extended presence at the centre of how knowledge is produced. This tradition has produced work of lasting value, but it is resource-intensive and, partly for that reason, tends to focus on a single site studied over a long period rather than a comparison across several occupational groups. The literature on women's organising, by contrast, often works at the level of the organisation, tracing SEWA's history or a particular union's campaign, which is well suited to documenting formal structures but less well suited to catching what happens in workplaces that have no formal structure at all. A study that wants to compare leadership across street vending, domestic work and home-based production, while still capturing the texture of individual women's working lives, needs to borrow something from both

traditions: the narrative depth of ethnography and life history, combined with a comparative design that ethnography alone rarely attempts.

Taken together, this literature leaves a fairly clear gap. Studies of India's informal economy are strong on structure, exploitation and precarity. Studies of women's organising are strong on formal collectives and unions. Studies of leadership and empowerment theory are strong on concepts but rarely applied specifically to

India's street vendors, domestic workers and home-based artisans. What is missing is a study that sits at the intersection of all three: one that takes seriously the possibility that leadership is already happening, informally, relationally and mostly without a name, among women who have never held office in any organisation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper works with three theoretical building blocks, each chosen because it corrects a specific blind spot in the existing literature.

Feminist political economy

Feminist political economy begins from the observation that mainstream economic analysis has always struggled to see the full range of women's work. Productive labour, the kind that shows up in GDP figures, has traditionally been treated as separate from reproductive labour: the cooking, caregiving and household management that make productive labour possible in the first place. Informal women workers sit awkwardly across this divide. A domestic worker is paid for what is, in a wealthier household, unpaid reproductive labour. A home-based artisan produces goods for sale from within the same four walls where she also cooks and cares for children. Feminist political economy gives this paper the vocabulary to insist that such work counts, economically and socially, even where official statistics undercount it. It also draws attention to the state's role in shaping, or failing to shape, protections for this kind of labour, which matters a great deal when the paper later turns to policy. A further implication, less often drawn out explicitly but important for this paper's argument, concerns where leadership is expected to happen. If productive work has traditionally been treated as the visible, public sphere in which leadership is recognised, and reproductive work as the invisible, private sphere in which it is not, then informal women workers, whose labour so often straddles both spheres at once, are almost structurally positioned to have their leadership overlooked, whatever form it takes. A domestic worker who organises her fellow workers in a particular residential colony to demand a uniform minimum wage is exercising leadership that looks, in form, very much like trade union organising; because it happens among women moving between private homes rather than on a factory floor, it rarely gets described using that language.

Intersectionality

If feminist political economy explains why informal women's work is undervalued in general, intersectionality explains why that undervaluation is not experienced uniformly. Caste, religion, migration status, marital status and age all interact with gender to produce very different working lives. A migrant home-based worker without local family support faces a different set of constraints, and probably a different set of leadership opportunities, than a locally rooted vendor with an extended family nearby. Any serious study of leadership among informal women workers has to build this kind of differentiation in from the start, rather than treating "women informal workers" as a single, interchangeable category. This paper follows Crenshaw's original insistence that overlapping disadvantages cannot simply be added together; they interact and produce distinct experiences that need to be examined on their own terms (Crenshaw, 1989).

A brief illustration helps make the point concrete. Consider two women, both home-based embroidery workers in the same city, one a long-settled resident with an extended family network nearby and the other a recent migrant living with her husband's family for the first time. Both face the same contractor, the same piece rate, and the same absence of legal protection. Yet the first woman may already have the standing, built up over years of local relationships, to gather several neighbours and approach the contractor as a group; the second may not yet have the local ties, or the confidence born of familiarity, to do the same, however capable she might otherwise

be. Treating these two women as a single category, "home-based women workers," would miss precisely the difference that intersectionality asks a researcher to notice: that migration status, layered onto gender and occupation, can open or close the door to leadership in ways that have nothing to do with individual ability.

Everyday leadership

The third and most central building block is a deliberately broadened concept of leadership. Conventional accounts of leadership, in management studies as much as in political science, tend to assume formal authority: a title, an office, a mandate. This paper follows a smaller but growing body of thinking that treats leadership as something that can also be relational and situational, exercised through the ordinary work of holding a group together, rather than only through formal command. On this view, a woman who mediates a dispute between two vendors over pavement space, who quietly teaches a newer domestic worker how to negotiate a fair wage, or who organises other home-based artisans to approach a buyer collectively rather than individually, is doing the work of leadership even though nobody elected her to anything and she may not think of herself as a leader at all. This is an important qualification. As the tenth working hypothesis in the original ICSSR proposal noted, many women performing exactly this kind of role will not describe themselves as leaders, because cultural expectations of modesty, or simply the absence of any word for what they are doing, keep the label from attaching itself to the practice. Recovering this leadership, then, is partly a matter of better fieldwork and partly a matter of better listening: participatory methods that let women describe what they actually do, rather than survey instruments that ask whether they hold a "leadership position."

This broadened definition is not simply a matter of academic taste. It has real consequences for what a researcher goes looking for in the field. A survey instrument built around the conventional definition of leadership would ask something like, "Do you hold any position in a union, cooperative or self-help group?" Most women in this study's target population would answer no, and the survey would move on, having learned very little. A researcher working with the broadened definition proposed here would instead ask about specific incidents: a dispute settled, a new worker shown the ropes, a group of neighbours persuaded to approach a buyer together rather than separately. The same woman who answered "no" to the first question might have a great deal to say in response to the second. The gap between these two answers is, in a sense, the entire subject matter of this paper.

Bringing the framework together

Bringing these three frameworks together produces the paper's central conceptual move: leadership among informal women workers should be understood as relational, differentiated by intersecting identity, and often invisible even to the women exercising it. A study designed around this understanding looks quite different from a conventional labour-market survey. It needs methods capable of drawing out narrative and reflection, not just counting hours worked and wages earned.

It is worth pausing on what this synthesis rules out, as well as what it rules in. It rules out any assumption that leadership among informal women workers will look uniform, since intersectionality insists that caste, migration status, religion and household position will shape both the opportunities for leadership and the forms it takes. It rules out treating the absence of a formal title as evidence of the absence of leadership, since the everyday leadership framework treats title and practice as separate things that happen, more often than not, to come apart in informal settings. And it rules out treating vulnerability and agency as opposites, since feminist political economy insists that they typically coexist: a woman can be simultaneously underpaid, legally unprotected and exposed to harassment, and also be the person her co-workers turn to when a dispute needs settling. Holding these three ideas together, rather than choosing one and discarding the others, is what allows the framework to do useful work in the sections that follow.

IDENTIFYING THE RESEARCH GAP

Building on the literature review, five specific gaps can be identified. First, the dominant framing of informal women workers as vulnerable, while accurate, is incomplete, and its dominance has practical consequences. If

policy is built entirely around the idea of women as passive recipients of protection, it will miss opportunities to work with, and strengthen, the informal organising capacity that already exists among them. Second, existing studies of women's organising in the informal economy concentrate heavily on formal collectives such as SEWA. This is entirely reasonable given SEWA's scale and influence, but it leaves out the much larger number of women who never join a formal collective and yet still exercise informal leadership in their own immediate working environment. Third, leadership studies in India generally treat leadership as a phenomenon of formal politics or formal organisations, leaving informal, decentralised, everyday leadership largely unexamined as a category in its own right. Fourth, comparative research across different informal occupations is rare. Most studies pick one occupation, street vending or domestic work or home-based production, and stay within it. A comparative design, looking at all three together, can reveal whether leadership takes broadly similar forms across occupational settings or whether it is shaped in quite different ways by the particular demands of each kind of work.

A fifth gap, more methodological than conceptual, is worth naming separately. Much of what is known about informal work in India comes from quantitative labour-force surveys, which are indispensable for tracking the scale and composition of informal employment but are poorly suited to capturing something as qualitative and relational as leadership. A survey can ask how many hours a woman worked last week; it struggles to ask, in any useful way, whether she settled a dispute among her co-workers or taught a newcomer how to negotiate with a difficult customer. Closing this gap requires not just more research on the right topic, but research carried out with the right kind of method, a point taken up directly in the next section.

The research design set out in the next section is built specifically to address these five gaps. It shifts the analytical starting point from vulnerability to agency, without denying vulnerability; it looks for leadership outside formal collectives as well as within them; it treats every day, informal leadership as a legitimate object of study; and it compares across three occupational groups rather than settling for a single case.

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Although this paper does not itself report empirical findings, it is written with a specific and fully worked-out research design in view, one that could be carried out by the present author or by other researchers working in this area. Setting the design out in detail here serves two purposes: it demonstrates that the conceptual argument developed above is capable of being operationalised, and it provides a template that future funded research, whether through ICSSR or another agency, could adopt with minimal modification.

Research design and setting

A qualitative, multi-sited case study design is proposed, with each occupational group, street vendors, domestic workers, and home-based workers including artisans, treated as a distinct case, allowing both within-group depth and across-group comparison. The proposed sites are selected urban and peri-urban areas of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, including cities such as Mumbai, Pune, Indore and Ujjain. These two states offer a useful combination of large urban informal labour markets, an existing base of collective organising activity through unions and self-help groups, and, in the case of Madhya Pradesh, a historical connection to the legacy of Ahilyabai Holkar that gives the enquiry a symbolic as well as an analytical rationale.

Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy is proposed, seeking out women who have worked in their occupation for at least three years and who are recognised by peers, whether or not by any formal title, as organisers, mentors or problem-solvers. Snowball sampling would supplement this initial recruitment, since informal leaders who hold no visible position are, almost by definition, hard to identify through any official list or membership roll. A target sample of fifteen to twenty participants per occupational group, some fifty to sixty women in total, is proposed, alongside eight to ten key informant interviews with NGO staff, union representatives and local officials who interact regularly with these workers. This scale is appropriate for the kind of sustained, trust-based qualitative engagement the study requires, and data saturation, the point at which further interviews stop yielding materially new insight, would guide the final closure of the sample within this range.

Data collection

Five methods are proposed, chosen to complement one another and to allow triangulation:

- **Life-history interviews.** In-depth, semi-structured conversations of sixty to ninety minutes, conducted in the participant's preferred language, tracing her working life, the challenges she has faced, and the moments where she recalls exercising some form of informal leadership.
- **Narrative inquiry around specific incidents.** Rather than asking women in the abstract whether they consider themselves leaders, this method asks for the story of a particular event, a dispute settled, a negotiation with an official, an occasion when fellow workers were organised for some shared purpose, and treats the resulting narrative as the primary data.
- **Focus group discussions.** Groups of five to eight women within each occupational category, used to explore shared understandings of leadership and to map informal networks that no individual interview could fully capture.
- **Participatory community mapping.** Visual, group-based mapping exercises in which women themselves identify key workspaces, support networks and points of negotiation or conflict, producing a spatial record of leadership practice that complements the narrative material.
- **Key informant interviews and observation.** Conversations with NGO staff, union representatives and local officials, together with informal observation of workspaces and community interactions, provide an external vantage point against which the women's own accounts can be checked and enriched.

Data analysis

Interview and focus group material would be transcribed, translated where necessary, and analysed thematically, combining deductive coding drawn from the theoretical framework with inductive codes allowed to emerge from the data itself. Suitable qualitative data analysis software could be used to manage this process systematically. Analysis would proceed both within and across the three occupational groups, so that shared patterns of leadership can be distinguished from patterns specific to a single occupation, and would remain attentive throughout to the intersectional differences, of caste, migration status and household position, that the theoretical framework identifies as central rather than incidental.

Ethical considerations

Any study of this kind would need to secure informed consent from every participant, with a clear explanation of the study's purpose and the voluntary nature of participation; to anonymise all names and identifying details in every output; to remain sensitive to participants' comfort, cultural norms and available time, building interview schedules around their working lives rather than the researcher's convenience; and to offer appropriate tokens of appreciation, such as travel costs or refreshments, for the time given. Ethical clearance would be sought from the host institution before any fieldwork began.

Limitations

A study built around three occupations in two states cannot claim statistical generalisability to India's informal workforce as a whole, and it does not attempt to. Its ambition is analytical rather than statistical: to build a richly detailed, theoretically grounded account of how leadership operates in these specific settings, in the expectation that the patterns identified will resonate, even if they do not repeat exactly, in comparable settings elsewhere in the country.

Positionality and reflexivity

Any researcher carrying out fieldwork of this kind needs to think carefully about her own position in relation to the women she is studying. A researcher approaching vendors, domestic workers or home-based artisans from a university position occupies a different social location, in terms of class, education and often caste, than most of her participants, and this difference will shape what women are willing to say, and to whom. Building enough trust for genuinely candid life-history material, rather than a polished or guarded account, generally

takes more than a single sitting. This is one reason the proposed design favours a moderate sample size, fifty to sixty participants, over a larger, more superficial one: the aim throughout is depth of engagement rather than breadth of coverage. Where possible, working through existing local contacts, whether an NGO, a known community figure, or a fellow worker who can make an introduction, helps narrow this distance, though it can never remove it entirely, and any resulting write-up needs to stay honest about that limitation rather than writing around it.

Indicative timeline

A study of this kind is realistically a twelve-month undertaking. The first two to three months would go towards recruitment of research staff, refinement of interview and mapping tools, and a short pilot phase in one site to test the instruments before wider fieldwork begins. Fieldwork itself, spread across the three occupational groups and two states, would occupy the middle six months, with transcription and translation proceeding in parallel rather than being left until the end. The final three months would be given over to thematic analysis, cross-case comparison, and the writing of outputs, including a full report, shorter policy-facing briefs, and the kind of academic paper this text is itself an early attempt at. Building analysis in alongside fieldwork, rather than treating it as a separate final stage, also allows emerging themes to inform later interviews, which matters a good deal in a qualitative design of this kind.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

Before turning to policy, it is worth setting out plainly what this paper adds that was not already available in the literature reviewed in Section 2, since a conceptual paper of this kind stands or falls on that contribution rather than on new data.

The first and most basic contribution is definitional. By insisting on a broadened, relational understanding of leadership, one that does not require formal office, this paper offers a vocabulary that can be used to notice and record forms of organising that existing survey instruments and interview schedules are simply not built to catch. This is a small move in one sense, a matter of asking a different question, but it has large downstream consequences for what gets counted as data and what gets treated as background noise.

The second contribution is comparative. Rather than settling for a single occupation, as most of the literature reviewed above does, the framework developed here is deliberately built to work across three quite different kinds of informal work: one conducted in public space and in constant negotiation with the state, one conducted inside someone else's private home, and one conducted inside the worker's own home but tied into an external supply chain. Leadership is likely to take different shapes across these three settings, shaped by how much public visibility the work carries, how much direct contact with authority it involves, and how isolated or connected the worker is to others doing similar work. A framework capable of noticing these differences, rather than assuming leadership looks the same everywhere, is more useful to policy than one that treats "informal women workers" as a single undifferentiated group.

The third contribution is the explicit link drawn between everyday leadership and the language of Women-Led Development. Government schemes built around this idea, including the ICSSR call that prompted the present paper, tend to leave the term loosely defined, and in practice it often gets filled in with examples drawn from formal politics or registered enterprise. This paper argues, and tries to show through the theoretical work in Section 3, that the term can and should stretch further, to include the kind of leadership documented informally

on a pavement or in a home workshop. Making that argument explicitly, and grounding it in established theory rather than assertion, is itself a contribution that future policy documents and research proposals can draw on.

Finally, the paper offers a fully specified methodology, set out in Section 5, that is ready to be picked up and used, whether by the present author with renewed funding or by other researchers working in adjacent fields. Conceptual papers are sometimes criticised for stopping at the level of argument and leaving the practical work of research design to someone else. This paper has tried not to do that.

DISCUSSION: WHY THIS MATTERS FOR POLICY

Women-Led Development as a policy idea

The Indian government's growing interest in Women-Led Development, most visibly through India's G20 presidency and through schemes such as the ICSSR call that originally prompted this paper, rests on an appealing premise: that women should be treated as agents of development rather than only as its beneficiaries. The difficulty is that this premise is easy to state and hard to operationalise, particularly for the enormous number of women whose economic life is lived entirely within the informal sector. If Women-Led Development is understood only in terms of formal political representation or enterprise ownership, it will simply pass over the majority of India's working women, who are neither elected representatives nor registered entrepreneurs. Recognising informal, everyday leadership, of the kind this paper has tried to describe, offers one way of making Women-Led Development meaningful for this much larger group.

Implications for labour and social protection policy

Current social protection thinking about informal workers tends to treat them as isolated individuals in need of a safety net, an insurance scheme, a pension contribution matched by the state. There is nothing wrong with this, but it misses an opportunity. If women informal workers already run functioning, if informal, systems of mutual aid and dispute resolution, then social protection policy could be designed to work with these systems rather than around them, for instance by channeling support through the informal networks women have already built rather than assuming that every worker must be reached individually.

Implications for urban governance

Street vendors and home-based workers interact constantly with municipal authority, over space, licenses and access to infrastructure, and these interactions are rarely designed with women's participation in mind. A better understanding of how women vendors already negotiate this terrain, often through informal leaders who speak for a group of stallholders, could inform more genuinely participatory approaches to urban governance, in which municipal bodies engage with existing informal leadership rather than either ignoring it or trying to replace it with a formal committee structure that may not reflect how authority actually works on the ground.

Relevance to the Sustainable Development Goals

The argument of this paper connects most directly to Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality, and specifically to its emphasis on women's full participation in leadership and decision-making at all levels, a target that is usually read as being about formal politics and corporate boardrooms but that has just as much relevance to a vegetable market or a garment workshop. It also speaks to Goal 8, on decent work, since recognising informal leadership is one step towards recognising informal work more generally as work that matters and deserves support, and to Goal 11, on sustainable cities, given how much of urban resilience in India depends on informal networks, including the ones women build and sustain. It touches Goal 1, on poverty, and Goal 10, on reduced inequality, insofar as the barriers to leadership identified through an intersectional lens, caste, migration status, lack of legal protection, are the same barriers that keep women trapped in poverty across generations, so that strengthening informal leadership and reducing poverty are not two separate agendas but two views of the same problem. None of this requires new resources so much as a change in how existing programmes are designed and who is consulted in designing them.

Implications for skilling and grassroots organisations

Government skilling and livelihood programmes aimed at informal women workers are, almost without exception, designed around the idea of the woman as beneficiary: someone to be trained, certified and, hopefully, made more employable. There is nothing wrong with this ambition, but it rests on an assumption that all relevant expertise sits outside the participant and needs to be delivered to her. A programme informed by the argument of this paper would ask a prior question: what leadership, mentoring and problem-solving capacity does this group of women already have, and how could a training programme build on it rather than working as if it did not exist? This has practical implications for how such programmes are designed. Peer-led components, in which women already recognised informally as mentors are given a formal role in training newer workers, would likely be both cheaper and more effective than an external trainer parachuted in for a fixed number of sessions. NGOs and community-based organisations working with informal workers are often closer to this insight already than government schemes are, since they encounter informal leadership directly in the course of their work; a study of the kind proposed here would give that intuitive knowledge a firmer evidential basis, and a vocabulary that could travel more easily into policy documents and funding proposals.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS PAPER

It is important to be plain about what this paper has not done. It has not collected primary data, and the claims made here about the existence and character of everyday leadership among informal women workers, while grounded in the theoretical literature and consistent with what occupation-specific studies have observed in passing, remain propositions to be tested rather than findings to be reported. Readers should treat the framework offered here as a set of working hypotheses, in the spirit of the original ICSSR proposal from which this paper developed, rather than as an empirically settled account. There is also a risk, inherent in any attempt to broaden a concept as widely used as leadership, of stretching the term until it loses analytical bite and comes to describe almost any competent handling of everyday difficulty. Guarding against this requires fieldwork disciplined enough to distinguish leadership, understood as action that is recognised by, and benefits, others beyond the individual herself, from simple personal coping, which benefits only the woman concerned. The methodology proposed in Section 5, particularly its reliance on peer recognition during sampling and its use of narrative inquiry around specific incidents, is designed with this distinction in mind, but only fieldwork itself can show whether the distinction holds up in practice.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that India's conversation about women's leadership needs to widen its field of vision. Leadership does not only happen in parliament, in the boardroom, or even in the registered self-help group; it also happens on a pavement where a vendor arbitrates a dispute over space, in a kitchen where a domestic worker teaches a newcomer how to hold her ground with a difficult employer, and in a home workshop where an artisan organises her neighbours to bargain collectively with a buyer. None of these women may ever use the word "leader" to describe themselves, and that absence of self-description is itself part of what this paper has tried to explain, rather than a reason to look away.

Building on a research proposal originally developed for the ICSSR's Women-Led Development scheme, this paper has reviewed the relevant literature, developed a theoretical framework combining feminist political economy, intersectionality and an expanded understanding of everyday leadership, identified the specific gaps in current knowledge, and set out a qualitative, comparative methodology capable of addressing them. The proposal that inspired this paper was not funded, but the underlying argument does not depend on that funding decision, and it is offered here in the hope that it will be of use to other researchers working in this field, and as a foundation for future empirical work, whether by the present author or by others, that can test and extend the framework set out above.

If India's development agenda is serious about the idea of women leading, rather than simply being led towards development, it will need to start noticing leadership where it already exists, however unrecognised and however

unnamed. The women described in this paper are not waiting to be made into leaders. In their own quiet way, working within markets, homes and workshops that official statistics barely register, many of them already are.

There is a modest but real value in simply saying this plainly in an academic paper, separate from the value of any future fieldwork that might confirm or complicate it. Language shapes what gets asked in the next round of surveys, what gets written into the next policy document, and what a young researcher considers a legitimate question for a doctoral thesis. If this paper succeeds in making the case that informal, everyday leadership among India's street vendors, domestic workers and home-based artisans is a serious and answerable research question, rather than a sentimental aside to a study of exploitation, it will have done the work it set out to do, even before a single interview is conducted.

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