



The Luxury of Leisure: Understanding Work and Rest from the Lens of Women Informal Economy

Aneysha Roy¹
Aastha Jain²

¹ Research Associate, SEWA Bharat
aneysharoy@gmail.com

² Community-based Visual Designer and Researcher
aasthajn29@gmail.com

Abstract

This article primarily focuses on access to leisure as seen through the intersectional lens of gender and work. Access to leisure and rest is a human right that is widely discrepant for different groups of people with varying social and economic backgrounds, and especially as experienced by women from marginalized communities. To better understand this phenomenon, a qualitative study was undertaken with 20 women from the informal trade group of home-based work who participated in in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in this regard. The findings show that informal women workers consistently grapple with the double burden of income-generating activities and domestic responsibilities at home, which severely restrict their ability to find time to engage in leisure activities or spend any free time as per their liking. The precarity of their work conditions along with the lack of social security or basic benefits like holidays or leaves from work further impede this access. The uncertainty of income on an everyday basis also results in a consistent choice to seek out and prioritize work over all else, even during festive seasons. The current situation calls for a range of holistic interventions at a policy level which would bring about labour reform to improve work conditions and emphasize the importance of mental health and equitable gender norms in public and private spaces.

Keywords:

Gender, informal work, leisure, social security, mental health

Introduction

A group of street vendors sitting around idly at a park and sharing a couple of laughs; a shopkeeper humming to the music on the radio while waiting for customers; daily wage labourers bonding over tea at the end of the day; a domestic worker taking a break from her chores to enjoy a serial on their phone;

how often does one witness such examples in the motions of everyday life? Even if a few of these find scattered representation in public and private spaces, the chances of especially women being seen in the given characterizations are quite limited. Over the years, there has been a significant growth in the amount of academic literature and scholarship tracing women's access to social and economic capital. A lot of this has focused on women's labour, productivity rates and recently, even started conversations on significance of the care economy and connected issues of time poverty. In tandem with this line of thinking, it is equally pertinent to understand the different elements which affect their quality of life amidst their continual burden of work at home and outside. Hence in this study, we identify one such theme which has traditionally found little space in the lives of poor women but is of immense value i.e., leisure. Etymologically, the word *leisure* is descended from the Latin word *licere*, which means "permitted" or to be "free". One of the many definitions of this phenomena are stated below,

"Leisure is considered primarily as a condition, sometimes referred to as a state of being, an attitude of mind or a quality of experience. It is distinguished by the individual's perceived freedom to act and distinguished from conditions imposed by necessity. It is assumed to be pleasurable and, although it may appeal because of certain anticipated benefits, it is intrinsically motivated: it is an end in itself and valuable for its own sake." – (Cushman & Laidler, 1990, p. 2)

As suggested by the given description and several others by leisure researchers over the years, leisure forms a crucial part of our lives and is directly linked to our social, emotional, and physical wellbeing. From the lens of mental health, research findings support the hypothesis that leisure acts as a buffer against the adverse effects of psychosocial stressors in one's daily life (Reich & Zautra, 1981; Iso-Ahola, 1994; Caltabiano, 1995 et al). Studies conducted in highly industrialized nations have also shown that the beneficial effects of engaging in leisure activities manifest themselves through direct improvements in the quality of one's life and are usually defined as increased good mood (Mannell, 1980; Hull, 1990), happiness and enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFever, 1989). Notwithstanding the multiple benefits of engaging in leisure activities, the point of deliberation then rests on the levels of access that different groups of individuals have to this certain kind of freedom. Not everyone has the luxury of leisure, especially at varying levels of

marginalization. Resultantly, this article focuses on tracing the leisure experiences of women in the informal sector, a form of employment that is associated with higher poverty rates (World Bank, 2021). It aims to understand the perceptions of women informal workers towards the concept of leisure, their agency around access to leisure, and its manifestations in their present-day lives.

Methodology

For the purpose of this exploratory study, a qualitative approach was used to collect data. Purposive sampling was used as the sampling strategy to identify the groups of women who could participate in the data collection. A total of 20 women informal workers from Delhi were identified from the broad category of home-based work and in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with these participants. A total of 4 FGDs and 20 IDIs were undertaken. Each of the focus group discussions was conducted with 4-5 participants while follow-up interviews were done with all of the women. The participants mostly belonged to an age group of between 20-35 years. The collected data was coded and analyzed based on Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis and organized according to the overarching themes and insights.

“Everyday” of a Home-Based Worker

In the post-industrial world, leisure is closely interlinked with labor. As employment, specifically for informal workers, dictates their economic and social status, their lives revolve around it. It also sets standards for where, what, how much, and when a worker works, which is different for different categories of workers.

Being an informal 'women' worker means two things. She is a worker who financially provides for her family without any social security or employment security. Second, she is a caregiver for her children and the caretaker of the house. Home-based workers produce goods or services in or near their homes for local, domestic, or global markets. Such a worker is either a piece-rate worker, an entrepreneur, or a combination of the two. Piece rate workers receive the raw materials from the contractors, work in their homes, and deliver the final pieces, based on which they get paid sometimes monthly or even quarterly. The

job ranges from making garlands, and envelopes, packing branded products, peeling garlic, and punching holes in diaries, to embroidery, stitching garments, punching eyelets in jeans, etc.

As the roles of caretaker and provider overlap in the same physical space, her day demands constant switching between the two, often exhausting both the body and the mind. A typical day in the life of a home-based worker starts at 5 a.m. when she gets up to store water. The first half of the day is spent cleaning, washing clothes, preparing meals, sending children to school, and sending the husband to work. Post-lunch, she sits down for three to four hours to complete the job at hand. As the sun sets, the cycle of household responsibilities repeats, which includes getting children back from tuition or classes, preparing and serving dinner, and cleaning the house. The day ends only after 11 p.m.

Contractual Work and The Right to Rest

Home-based work is seasonal in nature which means there are some months of the year where there is plenty of work accompanied with several idle ones. Even in the same month, there is no guarantee of continuous work. Informality of this kind not only impacts the financial contribution to the family but also the perception of their own work and identity as a worker. *"There is not enough work for us to take breaks. It is those who have regular work schedules, who go out to work, require breaks,"* says P1, a 28-year-old garland maker. This line of conversation clearly posits the larger question, i.e., who deserves rest? And is there any correlation between the dignity of work and the right to rest? In 1948, Universal Declaration of Human Rights established the Right to Rest and Leisure as a result of many labor movements including the eight-hour day movement. It provides everyone the right to reasonable working hours and paid holidays to ensure full development of a person's personality.

The seasonality of the work affects women the most during the festival season. Festivals are traditionally seen as periods for leisure and celebration, however for piece-rate workers, these are the busiest days of the year. All the orders received are on an urgent basis. The frequency and urgency of work are opportunities for them to earn more. In addition, the family responsibilities during the festivities

are also higher than usual, including preparing sweets, stitching new outfits, and meeting family relatives. *"The work is much more than what we can do. It's tough to manage both, but over the years I have found a balance so that neither family nor the contractor remains disappointed. We will celebrate the festival next year."* says P2, a community leader and embroidery artist. Home-based-workers are a huge part of the supply chains of many brands. What looks like a formal sector product is often the work of the informal workforce. Unaware of their role, they are in contact with only the contractor. The relationship between them is unequal and based on a verbal commitment. Thus, leaving an individual with very little bargaining power to demand for better wages, timely payment and employment security. Under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, companies have the responsibility to respect the right to leisure through certain entitlements like the provision of personal leaves, time off on public holidays and so on. But since this applies for the employees engaged in formal employment, the informal women workers are left out from this conveniently.

Motherhood and Access to Leisure

In India's social fabric, married women find themselves accountable to several groups of people. And these people—her children and husband, first of all along with her neighbourhood, employers and the larger community—affect her identity, perception of her work, and ability to rest. In lieu of this context, a significant proportion of our respondents shared that their caregiving responsibilities as a mother directly impact their decisions around resting or taking time off for leisure activities. Women have to wake up early in the morning and cook meals for their children before school, then drop them to school, pick them up again, feed them, take them to tuitions, and so on. There is a consensus among women about the need to accompany their children on their journey to school to ensure safety and hence it forms a crucial part of their daily routine. P3, a home-based worker shares her experience of the same by adding, *"If we give money to our children for transportation, random boys (jeb katre) on the streets near school snatch it from them so we have to go and get them or drop them off. They blackmail our children by threatening to throw them in the sewage lane if they don't give them the money."* Additionally, in cases where women have children who are very young, the opportunity to step out of their homes hardly comes by. P4, from

the same trade group shares that because she has a small child, her husband doesn't allow her to go out for work, and by extension, the chance to take a 'break from work' never comes up. Since she is at home all the time, she is constantly expected to be engaged in care work apart from making flower garlands on the side for some income. Young children have very different needs than teenagers but the changing responsibilities of a mother does not mean more time for her as a worker.

We observe that the small section of women who are able to extract some free time amidst their everyday grind have to necessarily align it with their children's schedules. This would mean that when the schools shut down for the holidays, the women still have more time to spare in contrast to when the schools are in session. In case of the latter, some respondents also share that they find it difficult to go out anywhere in their own time since their children might not be disciplined unless under constant supervision. A home-based worker P5 details this further by mentioning, *"Even if I step out for an hour, it's impossible to know whether my kids have gone for their tuition classes or not. In case there is some issue of this kind, then my husband will not have it. Without me taking care of them at all times, they will just go out on their own and do whatever they want."* Hence, we observe that motherhood, with its aligned roles and duties, has reduced women's motivation to seek out leisure time for themselves.

Lastly, the discussions with the women also shed light on the amount of stress that they have previously experienced on occasions when they took some time out for themselves or engaged in a leisure activity outside or at home. A respondent elaborated on this further by stating, *"If I go out anywhere, I have to get back to the kitchen immediately once I'm back. One is already tired from travelling and then having to work the moment I get home is really upsetting. It makes me not want to go anywhere anyway, the thought of going out somewhere and coming back to make rotis directly"*. Others added to her point by mentioning that in the past when they had gone out on their own, they would be tense about how everything was being managed back at home half the time. This persistent stress of work and the feelings of time pressure takes away from the respondents' limited experience of leisure and provides little motivation for them to seek out the same in the future. A few cross-national studies offer evidence of similar

phenomena as a result of the gendered differences in the experience of leisure (Bittman et al., 2003; Craig & Mullan, 2011). They argue that differences in leisure experiences stem from the variations in the time availability of women and men and societal norms. It is argued that women face a second shift' (Hochschild & Machung, 1989) because the time they spend in care and housework adds to their paid work hours leaving them with less time for leisure. Scholars also suggest that women's sense of responsibility for others prompts them to adjust their leisure to the needs and preferences of their partner and/or children (Miller & Brown, 2005; Shaw, 1994). As a result, their leisure activities are less in line with their own preferences and thus less enjoyable (Miller & Brown, 2005).

Aspirations and the Reality of Leisure

As observed by Thorstein Veblen (1899) in his classical work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, leisure and recreation patterns are closely linked with the character of the economy. It states that only post-industrialisation, work, and recreation were placed in opposition to each other. The perception of rest is deeply influenced by this correlation. Work often translates into money. As the antithesis of work, leisure would then mean time spent with no monetary value. The financial responsibilities, exploitation at work, lack of social security, and increasing cost of living pressure informal women workers to live for work and nothing else. *"In a society where, even water needs to be bought, how do we expect a worker like us to rest?"* says a woman from New Ashok Nagar, involved in tailoring, garland making, and embroidery. During COVID-19, several families took out loans. With reduced work and added debts, many workers still slog extra hours to make up for it.

We observe that health is one of the only things which compel women labour to rest. P4, an embroideress, shares, *"It was only when I got sick that I changed my routine entirely. Now I do not take on work that I know will put pressure on my body and mind. Nor do I feel pressured to return to work after a rest. If I don't take care of myself, who will take care of my children?"* Home-based workers in their off-season find 1-2 hours of free time after completing familial responsibilities and work. They prefer resting and sleeping during this time to recover from both physically exhausting roles. Many use this time for personal tasks, such as

organising and cleaning cupboards. For some, this much-needed rest helps them return to their routine with a fresh mind and an eagerness to finish pending tasks. While a sense of urgency to return to work never leaves the mind of some workers.

Many of the husbands remain skeptical towards home-based work as it is time-consuming and physically demanding work that remains unfairly compensated. When work remains unacknowledged, so does the need for leisure. Thus, women often feel free to rest or travel for leisure when they are alone in their homes. Traveling for leisure is uncommon amongst home-based workers. In bigger cities like Delhi, time and cost become major constraints, along with a few personal factors. Neither women are wired to leave children at home, nor do children enjoy staying back while their mother takes some time off. Moving around with more people becomes more expensive, thereby holding them back from doing it in the first place.

Finding time to rest, travel, shop remain aspirations for many. P6 summarizes what many women feel when she says, *"I want to work for myself, earn for myself, travel and shop with my own money, and do everything I wish to."*

Ethical Considerations

At the time of conducting this study, a range of ethical considerations were accounted for to ensure the rights, safety and wellbeing of the women. All of the participants were provided with a comprehensive overview of the purpose of the study, and the due process of gaining informed consent was followed. Strict confidentiality and anonymity of the participants' identities and responses were maintained during the process of data collection and analysis. Additionally, since all participants hail from highly vulnerable backgrounds, significant efforts were made to mitigate various power imbalances during interactions, with a special focus on integrating cultural sensitivity and empathy at every stage of the study. There was a continuous monitoring of research practices to ensure a lack of bias and risk minimization in the whole research process. Lastly, the participants were also given a debriefing session post data collection with the opportunity to address any questions or concerns they may have had.

Conclusion

Leisure, or the freedom to act, is fundamental to the mental wellbeing of an individual. The barriers to dignified living are similar to those to dignified work in the informal economy. Home-based workers, working in the confines of their house, are even more typically positioned in this conversation as they juggle between being a caretaker and a worker in the same space. Through this study, we have continually observed the scarce existence of leisure in the lives of these women. Most of them do not have the space to take time out for themselves for a leisure activity of their choice, let alone rest for a while or get enough sleep. They function day-after-day on extremely strained resources and are bound by the informal nature of their work conditions, irregular wages, the lack of job security, and redressal mechanisms, which further hampers their perception of their work and identity as workers. The financial burden as an intangible force leads many women to believe that if they keep working, they'll come off better in their situations. Resultantly for many workers, this vicious cycle leads to leisure being a trade-off with either finances, family time, or health. Drawing on these insights, we envision that advocacy around the rights of informal women workers should include the critical components of rest and leisure. Advancements in this sphere are intricately tied to systemic change and advancements in labour reform for women in the informal economy, in order to actually bring about change in mindsets about their rights and entitlements as workers. With this study, we hope to contribute to the larger conversation on the need to enable women to lead healthy and dignified lives with a renewed focus on 'access to leisure' as an important catalyst for the same.

Bibliography

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Caltabiano, M. L. (1995). Main and Stress-Moderating health benefits of leisure. *Loisir Et Société*, 18(1), 33–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07053436.1995.10715489>
- Craig, L., & Mullan, K. (2011). How Mothers and Fathers Share Childcare: A Cross-National Time-Use Comparison. *American Sociological Review*, 76(6), 834–861. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122411427673>
- Csikszentmihályi, M., & LeFevre, J. (1989). Optimal experience in work and leisure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56(5), 815–822. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.56.5.815>

Cushman, G., & Laidler, A. (1990). Recreation, leisure and social policy. In *Recreation, Leisure and Social Policy* (No. 220998794). Dept. of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, Lincoln University; Dept. of Recreation and Leisure Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, [Lincoln]. https://researcharchive.lincoln.ac.nz/bitstream/10182/1431/1/prt_op_4.pdf

Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. (1989). In *The Second shift*. Penguin Books.

Mannell, R. (1980). Social psychological techniques and strategies for studying leisure experiences. In S. Iso-Ahola (Ed.), *Social psychological perspectives on leisure and recreation*. Springfield: Charles Thomas.

Miller, Y. D., & Brown, W. J. (2005). Determinants of Active Leisure for Women with Young Children--An "Ethic of Care" Prevails. *Leisure Sciences*, 27(5), 405–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400500227308>

World Bank Group. (2021, May 11). Widespread Informality Likely to Slow Recovery from COVID-19 in Developing Economies. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/11/widespread-informality-likely-to-slow-recovery-from-covid-19-in-developing-economies>

APPENDIX

Sample guide from the Focus Group Discussions

Tool:

Demographic Profile -

- a. Name
- b. Age
- c. Education
- d. Trade
- e. Income
- f. Married/Unmarried
- g. Residence - Block, District
- h. Household Size
- i. No. of earning members in the family
- j. Role in SEWA

Perceptions around the significance of leisure, its enablers and disablers

1. What are your favourite ways of spending any free time that you get? (rest, entertainment, connecting with friends and family, etc.)
2. What is the length of time that you are currently able to spend doing something for yourself like seeking entertainment or resting, and not working? Are you able to take that time out easily, or is it more of a challenge? Please elaborate.
3. Does this time feel adequate or do you aspire for more? (In terms of amount of leisure time, type of leisure activities, no. of leisure activities) Please elaborate.
4. Do you feel any pressure to finish leisure activities quickly when you engage in them? If yes, why? (Probes - guilt, thoughts of work commitments, unsupportive environments etc.)
5. In case you feel that you get inadequate time for yourself, what are the main reasons which prevent you from having more? (Probes - income lost from taking time off, guilt, disapproval from others etc.)

6. Do you take breaks in the middle of your day when you're working? If yes, how many breaks do you take and what do you do during the breaks? (Probes – having tea, chatting with friends, going to the parlour etc.)

Leisure: Nature and access

7. How important do you feel is access to entertainment, leisure and rest in one's life?
8. What are your favourite spots in your neighbourhood? (Probes – Are there any spaces near your home where you like to visit/spend time in?)
9. If yes, why do you prefer those spots? (Probes – accessibility, feeling safe, etc.)
10. Do you get the chance to travel or use public transport independently? For e.g., visiting the market, using autos and buses, etc. If yes, what has that experience been like for you? (Probes – anxiety provoking v/s something enjoyable)

Miscellaneous

11. How do you celebrate festivals with your family?
12. How would you characterise the time spent during festivals? Does it mean more work for you in preparations or time to relax and enjoy? Please elaborate.
13. Does your family (positively or negatively) respond to any activities that you do in your free time?
14. Are there any leisure activities that you feel keen on doing but prohibit yourself from? Please elaborate.

