

Through Her Lens:

Self-captured stories of women sugarcane cutters

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Every year, more than a million people migrate from the drought-prone regions of Marathwada and northern Maharashtra during the sugarcane harvesting season for about four to six months in a year. Typically, it is a couple, often husband and wife referred to as *Koyta* (Sickle used for harvesting sugarcane), who undertake the labour, but they cannot leave their infants and young children behind. So, the entire family migrates, including older school-going children who help care for the younger ones. They reside in temporary settlements near the sugarcane fields and factories.

Sugarcane cutting is a back-breaking occupation which involves not just harvesting cane but also tying cane bundles, loading, unloading and transporting these to the factory. A couple, usually husband and wife, perform these tasks together, and with pressure to deliver on time, the *mukadam* (contractor or middleman) insists that each couple meets daily targets of harvesting two tonnes of cane. Typically, the working day is 12–13 hours long, with an additional 4–5 hours devoted by women for unpaid work such as childcare, cooking, cleaning, and fetching fuel and water.



PC - Akshay

The factory owner dictates timings; since profits are maximised when freshly harvested sugarcane promptly reaches the factory, women report being woken up at an unearthly time of 3 a.m. to load the trucks, often at the cost of their health. None can afford illness since missing work incurs a fine, which is usually twice that of the wages earned. Menstruating and pregnant women thus continue to work despite the discomfort caused to them; some women work till the last hour of their pregnancy and deliver at the work site itself. Single women workers often suffer sexual harassment at the workplace and have to carry their young children around during work (Shukla & Kulkarni, 2019).

Despite these hardships, cane cutting becomes a preferred source of livelihood due to persistent drought, agrarian crisis and non-availability of employment opportunities in their villages, forcing people—primarily from denotified and nomadic tribes, Dalits and OBCs (Other Backward Classes)—to migrate to the sugar belt in western Maharashtra such as Kolhapur, Sangli, and Satara districts in Maharashtra or sometimes as far as Karnataka in search of work (Shiralkar et al 2019).

In 2019, when a news report in the Hindu Business Line (Jadhav, 2019) highlighted the rising numbers of unwarranted hysterectomies among women sugarcane cutters, several networks and sanghatans working with rural women in Maharashtra came together and raised this issue with the government. The government was compelled to introduce some policies in favour of women sugarcane harvesters. However, their recognition and rights as independent workers were still out of the ambit of state policy.



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Embarking on a Collective Journey

Since then, the Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (MAKAAM) has taken up the cause, working to organise and amplify the voices of women sugarcane cutters. The Society for Promoting Participative Ecosystem Management (SOPPECOM), which convenes the network in Maharashtra, has supported the women cane cutters to gather evidence and present it to lawmakers, urging recognition and registration as workers and improvements in their social and economic conditions in cane cutting work.

What we present here is a visual and narrative journey born of our four-year collaboration with these women and their involvement in the photo-elicitation exercise. It was our conscious decision, rooted in the principles of feminist methodologies, to depart from the traditional researcher-subject relationship and facilitate their dual roles as both the subject and researcher. We acknowledge that we cannot fully capture their everyday lived experiences as well as they themselves can. Nevertheless, we believe we have a role to play in facilitating and co-analysing the evidence they provide. The results of our collaborative photo-video work are presented in the following pages.

Photo Elicitation: Idea and Implementation

By making photography a research tool, we encouraged women to turn the cameras onto themselves.

The photography brief was short and simple; we asked them to capture anything and everything that depicted their working and living conditions.

The pervasiveness of mobile phones has certainly made photography familiar and accessible. This was evident when women readily embraced the idea of taking pictures. To help them in taking more meaningful photos, we conducted a training session. It was practically impossible to personally train every woman, so we organised an online training session for Block Coordinators, who then extended the knowledge to the women workers.

However, a challenge came up - not all women possessed mobile phones with cameras, and some had no phones at all. They themselves overcame this hurdle by requesting fellow workers to capture pictures on their behalf, thereby documenting the activities they wished to record.

Capturing Their Realities

Subsequent to the photo brief, women started capturing pictures and videos whenever they could. During their field visits, the Block and District Coordinators, as well as SOPPECOM team members, also took photographs and provided the required guidance to women to improve the quality and diversity of subjects. Women shared their photographs and videos through WhatsApp, accompanied by brief descriptions.

Upon receiving their visual creations, we downloaded and saved all the images and clips. However, basic sorting and categorisation was needed for their easy retrieval. As the visuals were taken on mobile devices and shared via WhatsApp, their resolution sometimes suffered. Also, some of the initial pictures were extreme long shots, and some were blurry. These imperfections improved as women became more familiar with photography. Clearly, we were not expecting flawless pictures, as we valued these images as the women's expressions. The experiences and stories behind these photos unravelled as we collectively viewed them with all the women.

Through the act of capturing pictures, women visually documented their lives. Sharing these images collectively enabled the sharing of stories and stimulated deeper discussions about their issues and concerns.

Lighting the Stove in the Rains

"We were placed (by the contractor) in Kavatha village, Wai block, Satara district. It was raining heavily ever since we arrived. Still, we somehow managed to set up *khopis* (makeshift huts). However, the rainwater surrounded us, flooding the *khopis*. With no dry place around, I ended up lighting the chulha (stove) outside the hut as soon as the rain stopped. Going inside the hut was not an option since it could have damaged or burned the plastic roof or clothes. But getting the fire going was quite a task. I even added some pieces of plastic sheets and cloth, but despite all my efforts, the chulha wouldn't light. I felt a mix of sadness and anger for the challenges we have to face. I felt compelled to capture this moment. I have a simple mobile device, so I requested someone nearby to take a picture of me while I struggled to light the chulha. At first, he ignored my request, but I explained that I was not asking because I liked to be photographed. I wanted to record our difficult situation to share with others, and he finally agreed."

- **Aruna Ghongade**, Hingoli



PC -
Aruna Ghongade

Loading the Truck

"One day, I visited a sugarcane cutting site in Tembhurni village, Vasmat block. On arriving, I observed that all workers were engaged in loading the bundles (of cane) onto a tractor. What caught my attention was a young girl, who must be barely 16 years old,

standing to the side in the middle of the trolley. She was swiftly lifting the bundles of sugarcane from below, where the workers were carrying them on their heads, and handing them to two men who were standing on the trolley and arranging the bundles. She couldn't have weighed more than 35kgs, yet she was lifting bundles that matched her weight in size. Her only support was a rope tied around her waist, which supported her strenuous task of lifting the bundles from below and passing them upwards. Witnessing her relentless labour left me utterly stunned."

- **Chhaya Padghan**, Hingoli

PC - Archana Sabhadinde



PC - Chhaya Padghan, Kalawati Sawandkar,
Archana Sabhadinde



Stories Behind the Photos: In Their Own Words

The power of a photograph lies in its ability to capture a fleeting moment, preserving not only the incident but also the emotions and experiences of its creator. Here, we share a set of stories and expressions from women that unravel what prompted them to capture a picture.

Our Meals in Diwali

"It was the Diwali festival, but we found ourselves at our work sites. The harvesting season was in full swing, leaving us no opportunity to prepare for festive celebrations. During our mealtime, our son asked me for some vegetable. On that day, I had prepared a simple leafy vegetable while most people devoured laddus and other sweets. We were stuck with our work, consuming simple meals. It left me feeling awful."

- **Jyoti Thorat**, Beed



PC - Jyoti Thorat

Unusual Experience at a New Worksite

"During one of my visits to a new work site, I organised a meeting with people employed there. I shared the information about our organisation with the workers and contractors. They listened attentively. However, when I requested a group photo, they seemed hesitant. They appeared unsure about why I wanted to capture their photos. 'Anyone visits and asks us for pictures,' some remarked. Since the workers were reluctant, I turned to their contractor for cooperation. But he also wasn't willing to give photographs. It was then that I remembered a bunch of photos I had from other work sites and our interactions with government officials. I showed them the pictures, including the one with the District Collector, when we handed a memorandum of demands to him. As they viewed the pictures, they could grasp the nature of our organisational work. On realising that the photos are intended for a meaningful purpose, they became more willing to be photographed. It was our photo documentation that helped me win their trust and cooperation."

- **Kranti Khalge**, Beed



Residence at the Factory Site

"At times, we are not assigned specific work sites (by the contractor) when we arrive. Instead, we are temporarily housed near the sugar cane factory. Once, we had to stay at the factory for three days. During such stays, we do not have any huts, and we live in the open. All our daily activities - cooking, eating, and sleeping - are done under the open sky. To convey our situation, I requested a fellow worker to take this picture. In such places, women have no private space for bathing. We resort to bathing behind the tractor wheels or in the nearby bushes if the space permits. At such times, many people are present around us. They sometimes gaze or intrude when we are bathing. We assertively confront them, but some shameless individuals pay no heed."

- **Amrapali Dongre**, Beed

PC - Amrapali Dongre



The Journey Begins

In the Trolley on Our Way to Work

"In the vehicles we travel (arranged by the contractor), we often have to sit closely packed together. He fits two or more teams of workers into a single trolley, with men, women, and children all sitting together. Our luggage, food supplies, and essentials are placed at the bottom, and people sit on the top of them. We hardly get enough room to sit comfortably. At night, women sleep holding on to each other without being able to stretch out."

"When the work site is within the state, the journey takes two days and a night. When we travel to Karnataka (our neighbouring state), it takes three days and three nights to reach there. There are no proper arrangements for bathing during transit, so we stop at the roadside or near a hotel for meals. The workers themselves cover all expenses for travelling." - **Jyoti Thorat**, Beed



PC - Jyoti Thorat

PC - Manisha Tokale



Living Under the Open Sky

Setting up Khopi

"The contractor simply drops us off at the designated site, and we have to make the place livable. We must clean and prepare it before setting up our shelter, a process that takes about two days. While the factory owners provide the material required for building the hut, they deduct the expenses from our payments. The tarpaulin they supply to cover the huts is of substandard quality and does not withstand extreme heat, winds and rains. These huts serve as our homes for up to six months, but the roof often deteriorates. When this happens, we have to purchase a new roof using our own money. Additionally, we also gather or purchase

the bamboo necessary to construct the hut frame. The cost for setting up a *khopi* typically ranges from three to five thousand rupees."

"The contractor shows little concern for the facilities we need. We must independently arrange the resources we require, whether it is water, fodder or anything else. Since he manages multiple teams and constantly moves from place to place, he remains unaware of the challenges we encounter." - **Kalpana Thorat**, Beed



PC - Sadhana Sawant

From Our Homes to Our Work Sites: Unfolding the Journey

With practice, the subject of the photos expanded to cover various aspects of migration and work, ranging from leaving their villages for work to the everyday issues encountered on the working and living sites.

"Last year, we went to Karnataka, and the contractor charged us Rs. 1000 for the bamboo and an additional Rs. 300 for *koyta* (sickle used for harvesting sugarcane), deducting these amounts from our payment. The sickle needs regular sharpening and wears out or breaks after prolonged use. A worker typically needs three to four sickles throughout a season. If a sickle breaks or is lost, we have to pay for a new one. The contractor meticulously records every expense in his account book, documenting them under your name." - **Vidya Khalage**, Beed



PC -
Sadhana Sawant

Our Makeshift Bathroom

"You will not often come across such saree-clad bathing spaces. They are made for women if there is enough space. Most of the time, women bathe in the open. A makeshift bathing area is created by arranging two to three large stones to the side, where women bathe early in the morning when it is still dark. Water is also scarce, so we often manage with just half a bucket, tying petticoats or sarees around ourselves. We pour water quickly to take a brief bath. We cannot bathe properly. When this neglect extends for longer periods, it leads to health problems and menstrual issues."

- **Manisha Tokale**, Beed; **Laxmi Halase**, Hingoli



PC - Chaya Padghan

Inside Our Huts

"We store all our belongings inside the *khopi*. Actually, it is a tiny space, but we manage to fit everything by stacking items on top of each other. Additionally, the couple and children sleep inside the hut. In smaller or more crowded huts, the head remains inside the hut while the legs stretch outside." - **Kalpna Thorat**, Beed

PC - Sadhana Sawant



"We consider ourselves fortunate if a nearby farmer provides a water source. Otherwise, we have to walk long distances to get water. We fetch water from whatever sources are available, whether it is the wells, streams, or ponds. We have no choice." - **Amrapali Dongre**, Beed

The Solar Lamp

"This photo of a solar lamp is from the Kadi Vadgoan village site. Some workers possess such devices, but not many have them. When the electricity poles are available nearby, we draw power directly from them. But when we are residing in more remote areas without electricity poles, we resort to using oil lamps." And, they are compelled to use cooking oil for the lamps as kerosene isn't available.

- **Manisha Tokale**, Beed; **Vidya Khalage**, Beed

PC - Manisha Tokale



Cooking on the Stove

"Chulha is the most common means of cooking. Only a few people carry gas cylinders with them, typically used when lighting chulha is difficult due to excessive rain or occasionally used for making tea or cooking vegetables. Once a cylinder is empty, it becomes useless. Refilling it locally is expensive. We mostly use the chulha for all needs, such as heating water for bathing, for cooking, and we prefer Bhakari roasted on Chulha."

- **Sarika Dongre**, Beed



PC - Chaya Padghan

"When it rains, firewood becomes damp, making it difficult to use as it does not get lit easily. During such times, we resort to using pieces of plastic and cloth to light the chulha. Women often tear off the corner of their saree's pallu and use it for this purpose. We manage with limited resources and use whatever is available. We even use the clothes we are wearing. In extreme weather, if the chulha does not light despite our efforts, we cannot prepare a meal. In such cases, we either buy a chivada (a low-cost, savoury) from a local shop or go to bed hungry."

- **Aruna Ghongade**, Hingoli



PC - Aruna Ghongade

Our Trunk

"One crucial item in every cane cutters worker's family is the special large tin box or the trunk. It stores food grain, oil, and other cooking ingredients. When people embark on their journey from their village, they bring along a one-month supply of ration."

- **Sadhana Waghmare**



PC - Manisha Tokale

"However, it is not feasible to carry six-month ration from home. We purchase food items locally when our supplies run out. We typically buy them at the weekly market or from local grocery shops. But the shopkeepers often charge us more than they would charge the locals. The person at the flour mill also charges us more than the local residents would pay. Shopkeepers seize the opportunity to earn an additional income when sugarcane cutters are residing in the village." - **Kalpna Thorat**, Beed

Fear of Theft

"The grocery box is larger in size and does not fit inside the *Khopi*. We place it just outside the hut and lock it. There have been several incidents of theft after we are away at work, and there is no one around to protect it. Even when we lock the

boxes, it is not entirely safe. Thieves break the locks and take away groceries, oil, and whatever they can find. They also mix up all groceries, making them unusable."

(Women cane cutter)



PC - Manisha Tokale

Other than cooking material, thieves also search for money that women have saved. Women often have the habit of storing small amounts of cash in various hiding spots, like inside flour or food grains. "We never find out who these thieves are, whether they are locals or outsiders. In such a situation, whom do we complain against? When we try to report such incidents, the police do not take them seriously. The contractor is often away from the site, so we cannot rely on his support." (Women cane cutter)

PC - Savita Zende

At times, theft happens out of mischief or as a way to teach a lesson to the 'outside' workers. "Once in Sangavi village (Wai block, Satara district), when

we returned from work, we found all our boxes had been broken into. Just a couple of days earlier, we had a disagreement with a local farmer. We used to collect and sell leaves of the sugarcane plant (*Vaade*) as fodder to earn some extra income. We were ten couples, and each of us gave two bundles of fodder for free to the local farmer, who allowed us to settle on his land. However, he began demanding more without payment. When we refused, he threatened to teach us a lesson. Two days later, the theft happened. All our boxes were open, the groceries were mixed and scattered everywhere, and our money was missing. Dogs were seen sniffing around and eating up opened pouches of sugar and pulses. All our groceries were ruined and unusable."

- Kamal Satish Pande, Hingoli



PC - Sadhana Sawant

Fear and Insecurity

"There is a constant fear of animals, specially snakes, entering our *khopis*. Once, we were at a site where there were many *Mandul* snakes (Indian sand boa), and they would creep inside during the night and sit near my baby's bed. Although this snake is known to be harmless, it was quite scary. The children were frightened and reluctant to sleep inside the hut."

(Women cane cutter)

"We women always go together when fetching water. It is unsafe for a woman to go out alone. Therefore, we have to be cautious and never go alone to collect water or to relieve ourselves during the night."

- Vidya Khalage, Beed;
Jyoti Thorat, Beed



PC - Suvarna Asole

PC - Sadhana Sawant



Accidents

"In the event of accidents, nobody takes into account the losses we incur. Once we had covered a hut with *pachat* (leaf matter) because we had a shortage of plastic covers, and it was chillingly cold. The *pachat* helped to keep the hut warm. However, after two months, the *pachat* caught fire, and the entire hut was reduced to ashes within minutes. We lost all our belongings and were left with only what we were wearing. We immediately informed the contractor about this mishap. He came, surveyed the situation, and left. He did not provide any support to us. We had to take out a small loan to purchase all the essentials we needed." -**Aruna Ghongade**, Hingoli



PC - Chaya Padghan

Sexual Harassment and Lack of Safety

Anyone can enter the hut, and sometimes men come in to harass women.

"One year, I went to Karnataka with my sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, and entire family. We arrived late in the evening and were placed in the open yard in the bungalow of the farm owner. One of his servants was around to help us, and he interacted with everybody, had dinner with us, and then left. We decided to set up temporary shelters with mats and clothes for that night. I was sleeping in a shelter with my baby and the young daughter of my sister-in-law. In the middle of the night, I woke up to a loud noise. That servant was trying to enter my hut, but since it was a temporary structure, the supporting wood slipped, alerting me. I cried loudly, and he ran away. Hearing my cries, everyone else woke up and started shouting. They thought some animal was attacking our goats. In the meantime, that man fled into the cane field. We reported it to the farm owner the next day. The contractor also spoke with the farmer and asked him to ensure safety of his workers. Otherwise, he would take everyone back. The farm owner dismissed that man from his job."

- **Kalpna Thorat**



"I work as *ardha koyta* or half-a-sickle (A pair or couple is called *purna koyta*, but mostly, single women work as *ardha koyta*). Initially, I used to feel anxious about travelling to new work sites due to my unfamiliarity with these places. Once, I went to Belgaum. After arriving, we set up *khopis* on the land provided by the farm owner. He mentioned that he needs labour to collect fire wood on the farm. A group of women were ready to go with him. But he insisted that only one woman was necessary. We told him that a single woman would not go alone and that he had to pay for our labour. He left without saying anything.

Later that night, when I was sleeping, I sensed someone entering. Sometimes, dogs enter by creating openings in the side wall. I turned on the torch and directed it towards the source of the sound. I saw the man's face, and I shouted loudly, causing him to run away. By the time others came to check on me, he had already fled. I was shocked by what had happened, and my blood pressure dropped, causing me to faint. Fellow workers took me to a nearby hospital, and I recovered after two days of treatment. I was sure that it was the farm owner who had entered that night, but the contractor took no action to address the issue. Instead, he suggested I might have misunderstood the situation. He also did not assist in paying the hospital bill of Rs. 12,000, which we paid by taking a loan."



PC - Vidya Kulkarni

PC - Sadhana Sawant

"Last year, we went to Kolhapur for work, and my young niece accompanied me. She would usually stay at the living site to finish household chores while we were away. One day, when she went to fetch water, a boy threw a note at her. She chose to ignore him. On another occasion, he bought a rose and placed it in her water pot. She reported the incident to her father, who inquired with villagers about the boy. They informed us that he was a troublemaker in the village. They said there was little that could be done about him.

By the time we went to register a police complaint, the boy had disappeared. Later, we could not follow up on the complaint, and we are not sure if he was ever located. Reporting the incident to police also did not help much."

"Neither the village Sarpanch nor the police officers show any concern for the workers. They tend to ignore us, as they think we are 'outsiders' and needy wage workers. While the contractor is solely focused on completing his daily work targets. He believes that involving himself in such matters would be a waste of his time and money. So, he leaves the responsibility of our well-being squarely on our shoulders. He often says, 'You need to ensure your safety, I cannot guarantee it.' Regardless of the problems we encounter, be it medical issues or other expenses arising from crisis, he remains indifferent. He just remains aloof from our concerns, avoiding any involvement in order to evade making action." - **Savita Gavhane**, Beed



On the Work Site

Young Children

"We have to bring our young children with us, the older ones must look after their younger siblings. The children spend their time at the work site, where they play, eat, and sleep. We create a shade for them to sit and rest." (Women cane cutter)



Loading the Truck with the Ladder

PC - Sadhana Sawant

"When we load sugarcane bundles onto the trolley, we carry them on our heads. We climb the ladder, balancing the heavy load on our heads and pass it on. To get down, we swing on the rope at the top of the ladder and jump to the ground. Every woman, including those who are menstruating or pregnant, has to jump down. Because we all are exhausted from our work, no one is able to help each other." - **Deepa Waghmare**, Beed)



PC - Jyoti Thorat



the womb, and she also passed away. If her husband had been more considerate, she might have survived." (**Deepa Waghmare**, Beed)

"During menstruation, it is even harder to lift heavy bundles on our heads. We don't want to carry them, but we do not have anyone to share our struggles with because the women here are going through the same thing." - **Jyoti Thorat**, Beed

"This has serious consequences. Once, a pregnant woman was carrying bundles. Her husband pressurised her to walk faster to finish their work. She had been experiencing abdominal pain since morning, and the head load was too heavy for her. Later, her child died inside

PC - Sadhana Sawant



Insights Shared by Women

"I never used to take photographs before. In the training, Bhau explained the basic requirements for good photos. He mentioned that the background should be clear, and the photo should capture the surrounding atmosphere. I keep these tips in mind while taking pictures." - **Jyoti Thorat**, Beed



PC -
Seema Kulkarni

"I made a lot of mistakes initially. I used to take pictures from such a long distance that the activity was hardly visible. Once, I captured a video when we could hardly listen to what people said because of the loud music playing on the tractor." - **Jyoti Thorat**, Beed

"We have been doing cane cutting for many years, but we never thought about the challenges we face in this work. Now, because of the organisation, we are becoming more aware of our circumstances. We feel that we should talk about our problems and share the situations we work in. With this purpose in mind, I started taking pictures." - **Jyoti Thorat**, Beed

- Initially, the women were curious and intrigued by the idea of taking photos, but as they began capturing images, they became more aware and sensitive to their realities.
- Their perspective on how they view their working and living conditions is changing, and this shift is one of the biggest strengths of using photography in this context.
- After collectively viewing the photos that they had taken, they started recalling many more subjects they had missed initially. Such as pregnant women carrying heavy bundles on their heads, the hardships faced by children living and helping their parents on the field, late-night truck loading, and so on.



PC - Pallavi Harshe

The list keeps growing as their minds focus on things that go beyond the obvious and become subtler.

- The challenges they face during menstruation are rarely discussed or are only briefly mentioned. Now, they are thinking about ways to visually represent these issues. They are realising the power of photography in capturing their realities in a way that words alone cannot express.

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