

A Review of Indian Women Employed in the Informal Economy

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Abstract - As the world economy undergoes dramatic changes, this review article takes a look at the difficulties encountered by women in India who work in the informal sector. Women, especially those seeking work outside of agriculture, have a lot of options in India's unorganised economy. Wage inequality, dangerous working conditions, and a lack of social safeguards are just a few of the many challenges that women in this industry face, despite their increasing involvement. This research examines the decline in women's labour force participation and identifies many causes, including agricultural mechanisation, low salaries, and rising family incomes. Furthermore, it delves into the unique challenges that women encounter, such as prejudice based on gender, inadequate education, and the prevalence of sexual harassment. This study highlights the importance of the informal sector to India's economy and the need for specific measures to enhance the working conditions and economic security of women in this sector.

Keywords: Economy, Women, Informal Sector, Incomes, Agriculture, Inequality.

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INTRODUCTION

Many Indian households disregard their female members because of the country's patriarchal culture. Not only do kids not have enough to eat, but even in many households they are not given an education. No matter where you live, girls and women will inevitably be disregarded. When we look at the working conditions, we notice that women are paid less and have lesser status than males. Due to the fact that domestic women workers are now experiencing breaches concerning pay, scheduling, vacations, healthcare compensation, etc., a researcher will be studying their current situation¹.

The biological factors that determine a man's life expectancy are lower than those that affect women; nevertheless, the social and healthcare systems that are accessible to a family and community also have a role. With a few exceptions, women often have a 6.5-year greater life expectancy than males. These nations include India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, where traditional beliefs disregard women's health, especially

during their reproductive years, and where nutrition levels are severely poor. This comment so demonstrates that India is one of the nations where women are disregarded.

From an Indian cultural perspective, the traditional position of women is fraught with paradox. On the one hand, we read about how women had full equality with males throughout the Vedic era; on the other, it seems that wherever we look, women are portrayed as inferior and easily taken advantage of because of their reliance on men. Never did Manu approve of a marriage in which a woman was bought and sold. Despite his support for child marriage, he would caution parents against marrying their daughters off to unworthy men. Monogamy was firmly advocated by Manu, who also placed a high value on sexual celibacy, fidelity, and devotion to one's spouse. Even if it meant sacrificing personal freedom, his primary goal was to protect the family and society. The study concludes that there were historical figures who valued women, such as Manu. The exploitation of women, however, persisted among certain males².

¹ Papola T.S., (2022) "Industrialisation for Rural Development", in Singh, A.K, Papola T.S. and Mathur, R.S. (ed). Economic Policy and Planning in India, Sterling Publications, New Delhi

² Visaria, P., and P. Jacob, (2021) "The Informal Sector in India: Estimates of Its Size, and Needs and Problems of

There is a connection between women's rights and human rights, the researcher claims; women should have these rights, and human rights abuses may take many forms. Although women's employment is a relatively new occurrence in Indian culture, its importance is emphasised due to the belief that achieving economic independence is a necessary condition for achieving gender equality. A new role for working-class women has emerged for women in recent years, as long-held norms have crumbled. Most women now work to help support their families, according to the increasing expense of living. Many more women are now working outside the home. Thanks to the laws passed in recent years to ensure women have equal work opportunities and to combat sex discrimination, women's position has unquestionably undergone a dramatic shift. The study's author claims that the percentage of urbanites who are female business owners is rising steadily. Women need domestic assistance if they go out of the house.

From little restrictions on their independence to various forms of domestic and sexual assault, women throughout the globe endure a wide range of injustices. Social and cultural conventions about gender roles and responsibilities may explain the pervasiveness of gender subordination. It is uncertain if women's duties determined their socio-cultural standing or vice versa. However, at the current time, the roles that women perform in society are mostly determined by socio-cultural conventions.⁴ There are a lot of societal constraints that women face, and men often hold women in subordinate roles. A wide range of violent acts are perpetrated against them³.

An integral aspect of human liberty is the freedom to pursue one's means of subsistence. The lack of economic opportunity is one of the primary causes of women's inadequacy. This culture and the persistence of women's reliance on males are products of environmental factors and legal mandates. Myth has it that women should stay inside and do housework because males should not let them go outside. This is because women are weak, susceptible to falling, and the family would break apart if they become economically independent. Due to these concerns in civilised society, women were not permitted to work for pay, although husbands were permitted to assist with farming⁴.

Women would earn less money if they began seeking employment due to poverty. In reality, women keep them busier with domestic agriculture and

housekeeping. She became totally reliant on her spouse as a result of this mentality. This meant that Indian women couldn't take part in the field they were passionate about because of their economic reliance, lack of education, and social awareness. In the nineteenth century, as a result of societal and psychological shifts brought about by the spread of Western culture and the expansion of human understanding, there was a movement towards women leaving the house in search of paid work to support themselves and their children. As a result, life was dreadful since working women couldn't take care of the home and family, making it hard for them to be decent housewives and cherished family members. When females were had to work twelve to sixteen hours a day and were still paid less than men for comparable occupations, her suffering intensified.

A new dawn washed over the status of women in the workforce with the incorporation of humanism, equality, political rights, constitutions, and legal systems. Following India's independence, women were granted more freedom and access to more suitable fields. Regardless, many kind of employment still have discriminatory practices, such as paying female workers less than male workers for doing the same or equivalent work. This goes against our democratic values and the Indian Constitution's mandate that we must not discriminate against anybody, including women, and that we provide equal protection under the law⁵.

Consequently, Article 14 guarantees that everyone is treated equally and calls for the establishment of equality. It also outlaws discrimination based on any basis. This is not to say that equality must be enforced in a way that exacerbates inequality. When considering the equality principle, it is important to keep justice and equality in mind. Therefore, in order to achieve practical and genuine equality, the Indian court has established a reasonable categorisation theory to address possibilities. One way to make constitutional frameworks more practical is to make the article of equality more practical, as the state does not discriminate based on religion, race, caste, gender, or place of birth. Likewise, all citizens, including women, are given with equal possibilities for employment or appointment to any position within the State. Equal treatment of men and women is explicitly stated in these laws. Nonetheless, the frameworks were also cognisant of the Constitution's potential downsides. In doing so, they enabled the state to take further measures to ensure the safety and well-being of children and women, as well as to provide particular arrangements for these groups⁶.

Data Collection", Gujarat Institute of Development Research, Working Paper No. 70

³ M., Galvin, M., Maassen, A., & Hörschelmann, K. (2022). Catalysing urban transformation through women's empowerment in cooperative waste management: the SWaCH initiative in Pune, India. *Local Environment*, 1-15

⁴ Hammer, A., Keles, J. Y., & Olsen, W. (2022). Working Lives in India: Current insights and future directions. *Work, Employment and Society*, 36(6), 1139-1154

⁵ Hammer, A., Keles, J. Y., & Olsen, W. (2022). Working Lives in India: Current insights and future directions. *Work, Employment and Society*, 36(6), 1139-1154

⁶ Mondal, M., & Chakraborty, C. (2020). The analysis of unparalleled struggle for existence of urban women informal workers in West Bengal, India for survival and resilience to

The State must work to ensure that women get social justice, as outlined in the Directive Principles of State Policy, which also outline the future directions of the legislation. In particular, it works towards the goal of reducing economic inequality and doing away with status, facility, and opportunity disparities altogether. Article 39 states unequivocally that the State must direct its policies towards ensuring that men and women have equal access to appropriate means of subsistence and that men and women should be paid equally for equal labour.⁶ Considering these safeguards, it is clear that women and children's health and power are not being taken advantage of. Against this backdrop, this section seeks to critically examine the role of the court in ensuring social justice for children and women in the face of changing socioeconomic realities, particularly as it pertains to female work⁷.

Using the government's practice of reserving slots in the women's college, senior lecturer Kunhipacky has challenged the order of the government to appoint Smt. Saradamma, who is younger to him but senior among female professors, in the case of *State of Kerala v. K. Kunhipacky and another* ⁷. Some have claimed that the government no longer follows its previous policy of giving preference to female applicants for positions at the Women's College. The government said that the convention on women's appointment only was temporarily disregarded in the absence of a suitable female candidate. The State Women's College's contract, which mandated that female faculty members be appointed above male faculty, was deemed unreasonable by the Court. The prior ruling was highlighted by the Court. The Court highlighted its endorsement of the approval in this instance while referring to that judgement.

Developed and emerging nations alike are beginning to recognise the relevance of the unorganised sector. Units of production are being restructured to be more decentralised and adaptable. A nation's progress and prosperity are greatly influenced by the percentage of its population that is female-headed. Several variables influence the rates of female involvement, including social background, income, education, skill set, workplace safety, and laws that protect women. The informalization and feminisation of the workforce have been on the rise in recent decades, according to data collected from all around the globe. There has been an uptick in the proportion of female employees⁸.

The situation of the Indian economy has changed drastically due to globalisation. More and more women are joining the workforce, and with them come new

types of work, such as contract work, part-time jobs, working from home, flexible hours, and temporary jobs. Moreover, due to seasonal unemployment and a general lack of productive jobs in rural areas, an increasing number of women are turning to the informal sector in search of cash. It is important to note the role of the unorganised sector in providing women with job opportunities. It also has a large adds to the national gross domestic product. There are a few beneficial aspects of the unorganised sector, such as the ability to work from anywhere, make use of latent resources, and engage in labor-based industrial activities. In terms of alleviating poverty, it is crucial.

Women make up a sizable portion of India's workforce, and they're making strides to become more visible in the job market. It is now pretty well-documented that women's labour, whether wage or unpaid, is under-represented. The value of women's contributions has always been disregarded in India. When women labour for themselves or as domestic help, they are never considered a family's economic agent since they do not get monetary compensation for their labour. On a national and regional scale, women's labour force participation has been on the rise, notwithstanding the limitations and biases of the two primary national data gathering instruments, the Census and the National Sample Survey⁹.

It demonstrates that women do double-duty by taking part in both economic activities and household duties. There is a lot of unpaid or undervalued labour that women do around the home, and they put in more hours than males do. Consequently, a significant amount of the contribution made by female workers is either not recognised or is undervalued. They are not guaranteed employment or social security benefits in the unorganised economy. Legislation does not provide protections to the majority of workers in the unorganised sector, including those who work from home, those who earn a daily pay, those who undertake domestic labour, sellers, etc.

But we can't turn a blind eye to the dark side of the unregulated market. The informal sector is notorious for its high exploitation rate, poor salaries, hazardous working conditions, and sexual assault. Harsh working circumstances greatly exploit female workers. Low earnings, long hours, unclean working conditions, sexual harassment, harsh language, lack of a contract or agreement, etc. are all common elements of women's labour in India's informal sector¹⁰.

COVID-19 pandemic risk. *GeoJournal*, 87(Suppl 4), 607-630

⁷ Karne, M., & Sharma, M. (2021). Labour force participation and economic challenges for women in postCOVID India. *Gendered experiences of COVID-19 in India*, 57-75.

⁸ Mishra, D. K. (2019). Migrant labour during the Pandemic: a political economy perspective. *The Indian Economic Journal*, 69(3), 410-424.

⁹ Yadav, V., & Jacob, S. (2017). Impact of the Lockdown on Women Domestic Workers. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 67(3), 300-313

¹⁰ Harriss-White, B. (2018). Formal, informal, social and unsocial economy: Waste and the work and politics of women 1. In *Theorizing Cohesive Development* (pp. 142-173).

THE NUMBER OF WOMEN EMPLOYED BY INDIA'S UNORGANISED SECTOR

Employment increased significantly from 2009–10 to 2011–12 compared to the preceding period, according to statistics from the 68th Round of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO). From 2009–10 to 2011–12, the total workforce based on the country's typical status rose from 459 million to 472.9 million. Compared to that, there was a mere 1.1 million growth in employment from 2004–05 to 2009–10¹¹.

Women outnumbered men in non-agricultural informal work in 30 of the 41 nations where sex-segregated data is available, according to the ILO research (2013). Despite the fact that women were under-represented in the informal sector. In India, 86.6% of women and 82.7% of men work in informal occupations, which constitute the entire non-agricultural workforce. Men and metropolitan regions have seen stronger job growth when looking at the big picture. From 1999–2000 to 2011–2012, male employment rose at a rate of 1.9% per year, whereas female employment grew at a rate of just 0.3% per year.

The need for more educated and trained workers has increased since liberalisation, and as a result, more and more women are seeking employment in the informal sector. The data that is available for the informal sector likewise clearly shows this. From 2004–05 to 2011–12, the number of people working informally in non-agricultural occupations rose from 160.83 million to 204.03 million, an increase of 27 percent. According to Kalyanani (2012). According to Kundu (1997), female workers are no longer classified as self-employed due to the existing structure of subcontracting in the urban economy. They are finding job more often, regardless of the pay rate or working conditions. The rise of a new subcontracting structure in the informal urban economy and a dramatic shift in the way work is organised are both reflected in this.

Approximately 20% of India's women workers are located in metropolitan areas, while over 94% of all women workers are involved in the informal sector. Women in the informal economy mostly come from those parts of society that must have money somehow. On top of that, women who do work often do low-paying, unskilled positions¹².

Most women work because they feel they need to in order to provide for their families. Many women leave the workforce as soon as their families' incomes rise. Many women are unable to pursue careers despite having the necessary education and technical skills because their families are too financially secure. In low-income areas, this is the main reason why women

¹¹ Baruah, B. (2020). Women and globalisation: challenges and opportunities facing construction workers in contemporary India. *Development in Practice*, 20(1), 31–44.

¹² Tripathy, S. N. (2023). *Women in informal sector*. Discovery Publishing House

are more likely to get involved in politics. The data on the female involvement rate in urban and rural areas makes this point quite clear. Women in rural areas have a greater involvement percentage (27%) than those in urban areas (only 10%).

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE DECLINING FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE

When broken down by gender, there is still a significant gender gap and women's low labour force participation rates. On top of that, women who do work often find themselves in low-paying positions. The falling female labour force participation rate in India, which fell from 42.7% in 2004–05 to 31.2% in 2011–12, has been the subject of heated controversy in recent years. A comparable percentage of women participated in 2013–14, according to the most recent statistics from the Labour Bureau (31.1 percent)¹³. A possible explanation for the falling female labour force participation rate exists. The following are some potential causes of low FWPR that have been suggested by reviewing relevant papers and literature:

- a. **The Increasing Use of Mechanised Agriculture:** In recent years, farmers in India have begun to use an increasing number of machines in the agricultural sector. As a result, fewer rural Indian households need the services of women labourers.
- b. **Low Pay:** Employers should expect women to leave the workforce due to the low pay and unsafe working conditions. Maybe the ladies didn't want to stay in the workforce because of the poor pay and long hours.
- c. **Increased Household Income:** The overall income level of individuals in India has clearly improved. As a consequence, women may feel less pressure to look for jobs outside the home.
- d. **Rising Educational Participation:** From 2007 onwards, we have seen an uptick in the number of rural and urban females enrolled in school. Even if it doesn't entirely explain the drop in the female involvement rate, this is certainly a contributing factor.

THE UNORGANISED SECTOR: THE STRUGGLES AND OBSTACLES FACED BY WOMEN WORKERS

As a whole, women in India's workforce lack the necessary skills to undertake a wide range of jobs, including construction, rag picking, jewellery manufacturing, rolling papad, housework, tailoring, beautician, vendors, and so on. These women professionals confront a multitude of obstacles and

¹³ National perspective Plan for Women: 1988-2000, Government of India.

problems on the job¹⁴. Here are some of the most common challenges that these professionals encounter:

1. **Poor compensation:** For equal labour, men and women get drastically different amounts of money. In India, wage discrimination is prevalent. Women who labour in low-caste and disadvantaged neighbourhoods also tend to have a higher rate.
2. **Health issues:** facilities for restrooms, showers, and the like are often lacking on job sites where women make up a large portion of the workforce, such as in the construction and mining industries. Infections and illnesses abound as a result. Women workers endure the hardship of ill health and diseases as a result of working long hours for extremely low earnings and lifting heavy loads during pregnancy.
3. **Sexual harassment and abuse:** Workers and employers in India often subject women to physical and sexual assault. There is a disproportionate amount of aggression, harassment, and abuse against women who work in the home, on construction sites, or in mines.
4. **Inadequate social protections:** While several regulations protect women in India's organised workforce, the informal economy is mostly unregulated. Women workers do a lot of hard labour, both productively and in terms of reproduction, yet they don't get any benefits like paid time off, health insurance, or social security (such as a provident fund or gratuity). They experience job loss and income loss while pregnant, which negatively impacts the health of both the mother and the baby.
5. **Lack of competence:** Female employees tend to be less trained and educated. Nobody likes to put money into a woman's education and career growth, not her parents and not her spouses. Consequently, many continue to work in low-paying employment.
6. **Discrimination based on gender:** Women encounter several forms of workplace discrimination. Their salaries are lower than those of men in similar positions. Even after years of service, males are often promoted to higher-level positions and given more responsibility, while women are often only allowed to do manual jobs. Employees report that their bosses are kind to males but harsh and unpleasant to females.

Because women make up the vast majority of domestic workers in most households, this research focusses only on this demographic¹⁵.

CONCLUSION

¹⁴ United Nations (2020), *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics*, New York: UN Statistical Division.

¹⁵ Primary Census Abstract, 2021, Government of India.

When it comes to finding work in India, the informal sector is vital, especially for women. But women's work is still underappreciated and unappreciated, even though it's a major contributor to the economy. There are a lot of obstacles that women in the unorganised sector must overcome, such as low pay, dangerous working conditions, and no social safeguards. Discrimination based on gender, insufficient education, and nonexistent social security benefits all compound these problems. It is critical to enact legislation that guarantee women workers in the informal sector have access to social security, decent salaries, and safe working conditions if we are to ameliorate their plight.

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