

A STUDY ON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROBLEMS FACED BY THE WOMEN WORKERS IN THE UNORGANIZED MANUFACTURING SECTOR: EVIDENCE FROM ERNAKULAM DISTRICT

Raji Prasad G V*

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to assess the socio-economic and the working conditions of the women workers in the unorganized manufacturing sector in Ernakulam district in Kerala. Women workers' face many issues such as long hours of work, low wages, meagre rates per piece, lack of social security and lack of union and organizational support. More importantly, their conditions of work and health are terrible. The present study has followed the descriptive research method to carry out the survey. A formally structured questionnaire was prepared and circulated among the target sample for this purpose. The result shows that 68 per cent of the women workers are in the age group of 20 - 40 years. 40 per cent of the women workers fall in temporary category. Weekly payment is the most common mode of payment. 42 per cent of the women workers said that they had faced abuse at their workplace. However, despite these problems, unorganized manufacturing sector is the most suitable avenue for employment generation among rural and urban women.

Key words: *Unorganized Sector, Manufacturing Unit, Women Workers, WPRs, FWPRs*

* Assistant Professor and HoD, Department of Economics, NSS College, Cherthala, Alappuzha, Kerala E-mail: rajihari8@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Informal economy constitutes informal sector, formal sector, and the household sector. 61.2 per cent of world's workers are informally employed. Out of that, 51.9 per cent are in the informal sector, 6.7 per cent are in the formal sector, and 2.5 per cent are in households (ILO, 2018). Globally, female labour force participation rate (LFPR) has remained fairly flat over the last three decades, and today, roughly half of the working-age women participate in the labour force (ILO,2023). The report also states that the global LFPR for women is just over 50 per cent as compared to 80 per cent for men. Canada has the highest female LFPR at 61.3 per cent. Emerging and developing countries have higher shares of informal employment than developed countries. Emerging and developing countries represent 82 per cent of world employment, 69.6 per cent of the employed in emerging and developing countries are in informal employment, 18.3 per cent of the employed in developed countries are in informal sector (ILO, 2018). The participation of women in the labour force varies considerably across developing countries and emerging economies, which is far more than in the case of men. In the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, less than one - third of women of working age participate in the labour force, while the proportion reaches around two-thirds in East-Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (ILO, 2023).

India is home to approximately 663 million women, of which approximately 450 million women fall in the working age of 15-64 years. India's FLFPR had been showing a sharp declining trend over the last three decades, from 30.2 per cent in 1990 to hitting an all-time low of 17.5 per cent in 2018, as per reports by World Bank, Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS). According to the release of the report of Indian Air Force by the Ministry of Defense in 2022¹, women officers of the Army Medical corps and Army Dental corps make up about 21.25 per cent of the officers in the Indian army. Looking at the gender aspect, 86.1 million women worked in the agriculture sector, 33.7 million in the services sector and 23.9 million in the industry sector, which includes construction (Ramesh and Jaspal, 2022). The numbers show that 60 per cent of all women workers in the country were employed in agriculture, 17 per cent in the industry, and 23 per cent in the services sector during 2019-20 (IEA,105th Annual Conference,2022). The macro-overview of the occupational structure of female work participation shows that a larger share of women workers is still in primary sector in India. In recent times, the Indian armed forces have seen a flow in the participation of women. According to the ministry, women represent 6 per cent of the total officers in the Indian Navy and 13.69 per cent in the Air Force. However, in 2022, India has also witnessed an unexpected trend of a declining female LFPR at a time of high economic growth. Between 2004-05 and 2011-12, while the

1 <https://newsonair.com>>Defence

GDP grew at 8 per cent per annum, the female LFPR declined 23 per cent from an already low 35 per cent in 2004-2005. Though some attributed this to longer retention of girls in education (Abraham, 2013) as well as rising household income (Kapsos et al., 2014). Technological advancements and increased mechanization further reduced the demand for female labour in certain sectors, contributing to the decline in the female LFPR (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2014). The present study provides alternative explanations for the decline in the female LFPR, suggesting that longer retention of girls in education and rising household income alone may not fully account for the trend (Sanghi et al., 2015).

The present study examined the female LFPR in the case of Kerala for several reasons. Kerala has shown a remarkable performance in human development indicators as compared to other states in India. Its high sex ratio is a widely discussed indicator of women's status. Kerala's performance in the field of women education is also commendable: in 2022, the literacy rate of Kerala was 96.2 percent (it was 77.7 per cent for All India). In higher education, females outnumber males (graduate and post-graduate education in arts and science courses, although they are far behind men in technical education) (Kodoth M.E, 2005). India's female work participation rate was just 25 per cent in 2021, which, according to the federal government data, is among the lowest for emerging economies.

Women are disproportionately represented in the unorganized sector, in lower-paid forms of work, such as temporary and casual workers, part-time jobs, home-based work, self-employment, and work in individual units. They face serious problems and constraints related to work such as low income, lack of continuity, insecurity, wage discrimination, unhealthy job relationship, absence of medical and accident care etc. Therefore, this article concentrates on the problems and issues faced by the unorganized women workers in the manufacturing sector in Kerala. It also aims at understanding the degree of vulnerability of the women workers in the unorganized sector in Kerala.

The paper has six sections including the introduction section. The next section deals with Female Work Participation Rate in India and Kerala followed by problems and challenges faced by Women Workers at workplace and the evidence from past studies. The fourth section covers Methodology, the fifth section discusses the Result and Discussion and the last section concludes the paper.

2. Female Work Participation Rate in India and Kerala: Evidence from Secondary Data

India has developed in many fields to a great extent but it is still far behind in the field of gender equality. In our country the number of women going out

to work is very less. The participation of women in the labour force varies considerably across developing countries and emerging economies far more than in the case of men. In the Middle East, North America, and South Asia, less than one-third of women of working age participate in labour force, while the proportion reaches around two-thirds in East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In India, this variation is driven by a wide range of economic and social factors including economic growth, increasing educational attainment, falling fertility rates and social norms. Besides, labour market gender gaps are more pronounced in developing countries and the disparity is highest in South Asian countries. According to Michael Debabrata Patra,² the female workforce participation in India is among the lowest in the world and continues to fall. India stands lower than even Pakistan. The situation has even worsened due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. With less than a third of women in work force, India has one of the lowest female LFPRs in the world as per the World Bank's Report.³ It states that the female LFPR in India was at 19 per cent in 2020 from over 26 per cent in 2005, even lower than in Bangladesh (35 per cent) and Sri Lanka (31 per cent) (Union Budget, 2022⁴). The female workforce participation in agriculture fell from 46 per cent in 1987 to 33 per cent in 2017 and further decreased to 23 per cent in 2022. Female workforce participation has also declined slightly from 3.5 per cent to 2.5 per cent in manufacturing. The exception is construction and services, where it has risen by almost 1-1.5 per cent (PLFS, 2020-21).

Gender Statistics (2017-18)⁵ reveals that, out of the total population in Kerala, during 2011-12, about 57 per cent were economically active or part of labour force whereas, the per cent of economically active women's population was only 25 per cent. Census 2001⁶, reveals that Kerala has the lowest workforce participation rate of females among all the major states in India. According to Economic Review (2016),⁷ the gender gap in levels of employment is also brought out by the female work participation rates (WPRs) while male WPRs shows a mild upward trend or constancy, there is a declining trend in female WPRs; that Kerala women have a higher work participation rate in urban areas vis-à-vis all India is concerned. Work participation rate of female workers in rural areas was higher which stood at 30.0 per cent as compared to the WPR of 15.4 per cent in urban areas (Table 1). The State of Himachal Pradesh had the highest female WPR (44.8 per cent), whereas the lowest female WPR was reported in the case of Delhi (10.6 per cent) (Office of the Registrar General, India⁸). The table reveals that as per Census 2011, workers constituted 39.8

2 <https://www.indiatimes.com/eExplainers/News>

3 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/03/08/working-for-women-in-india>

4 <https://www.who.int/covid19>

5 <https://ecostat.kerala.gov.in/publications/7pdf>

6 https://www.mospi.gov.in/files/chapter_4

7 <https://iosrjournals.org/vol.26-Issues8/Series3>

8 https://www.mospi.gov.in/files/chapter_4

per cent of the total population, whereas, the ratio of female workers was 25.5 per cent. It also shows that though female work participation rate has increased overtime (25.5 per cent) yet it is far less than the male WPR (53.3 per cent).

Table 1: Work Participation* Rate by Sex in India (1971-2011)

Year	Total/Rural/ Urban	Persons	Males	Females
1971	Total	33.08	52.61	12.11
	Rural	34.03	53.62	13.42
	Urban	29.34	48.82	6.68
1981	Total	36.70	52.62	19.67
	Rural	38.79	53.77	23.06
	Urban	29.99	49.06	8.31
1991	Total	37.50	51.61	22.27
	Rural	40.09	52.58	6.79
	Urban	30.16	48.92	9.19
2001	Total	39.10	51.68	25.63
	Rural	41.75	52.11	30.79
	Urban	32.2	50.60	11.88
2011	Total	39.8	53.3	25.5
	Rural	41.8	53.0	30.0
	Urban	35.3	53.8	15.4

Source: Office of the Registrar General, India: - *The Workforce Participation Rate is the portion of the working population in the 16-64 years’ age group in the economy, currently in employment or seeking employment.

The decision of ability of women to participate in the labour force is the outcome of various economic and social factors that interact in a complex manner at both the household and at the macro level. Some of the most important factors include educational attainment, fertility rates and the age of marriage, economic growth/cyclical effects, and urbanization. In addition to these issues, social norms determining the role of women in public domain continue to affect outcomes. The nature of economic growth in the country has meant that jobs were not created in large numbers in sectors that could readily absorb women, especially for those in rural areas. Despite inadequate job creation, household incomes did rise, which potentially reduced women’s participation, especially in subsidiary activities (income effect) due to change in preferences. Finally, though most women in India work and contribute to the economy in one form or other, much of their work is not documented or accounted for in official statistics, and thus women’s work tends to be underreported.

3. Problems and Challenges faced by Women Workers at Workplace and the Evidence from Past Studies

In this section we have tried to do a critical review of some of the recent studies that have examined the women workers' issues (in different manufacturing sectors) in the context of India and Kerala.

The workforce participation of women workers is more as compared to men in unorganized sector. The condition of these workers is pitiable and the existing literature suggests that there is a need to reform the policy related to condition of women workers at National Level (Kumawat, 2015).

A secondary data-based study on the problems of different categories of female workers in the unorganised sector suggested that skill development programmes help women to enhance their skill, so policymakers should focus on skill development programmes and opening of institutions (Manju, 2017). There should be amendments in labour laws and awareness should be generated regarding the rights of women workers in the unorganized sector.

A study on health hazards and occupational safety challenges for the unorganized sector workers in India, pointed out that unorganized sector employees get very less returns from their work and they work in worst physical environment. They are highly sensible about the insecurity in employment and are not getting socio-economic protection against the hazards in health, work, and life (Mukhtar, 2021).

A comprehensive study by Sudesh and Dhanlakshmi (2019) focused on abuse and exploitation of domestic women workers in India with human rights perspective. Domestic women's worker's considered as a part-time occupation and they suffer from various forms of exploitation such as, no weekly offs, no defined work-time, no decent wages, sexual and physical abuses and harassment, termination from work etc. This study also stressed on the major role of ILO and the importance of equal opportunities for women and men at different levels.

An effort has been made in this study to understand the working and living conditions of the workers in the unorganized sector and to identify the gaps between organized and unorganized sector. Unorganized sectors are characterized by seasonal employment and contractual work situation. There are no social security and welfare legislations (Kapur et al., 2014). In this sector people face problems such as poor health conditions, sub-standard working life, and harassment at workplace, inadequate and unequal wage structure, long working hours, poor housing facilities, lack of safety measures, and no proper education for children of the workers. To improve the conditions of the workers in this sector, Government should interfere with policies and take necessary action.

4. Methodology

Methodology adopted for this study is both descriptive as well as quantitative. This study includes qualitative method also. The study adopted a variety of tools and strategies including face-to-face interviews and Focus Group Discussions_ (FGD) with 500 women workers from different manufacturing units of Ernakulam district in Kerala. Simple random sampling was used to collect the samples. In order to collect qualitative information from the field, participant observation, in-depth interviews and FGD were also conducted. Later, data collected from primary and secondary sources were carefully scrutinized and transcribed before the commencement of data tabulation, which were interpreted through tables and percentages. Primary data were mainly used for this study-since secondary data were inadequate to explain the problems taken up in the unorganized sector in Kerala. However, secondary data were used for preparation of the background for the field survey and for an understanding of the dimensions of the problem involved.

5. Result and Discussion

5.1 Socio-economic Profile of Women Workers in the Unorganized Manufacturing Sector

Demography is the statistical study of population. It covers the general information of respondents/women workers in the unorganized sector. The present study collected data on several socio-economic indicators like personal information, age, educational status, marital status, religion, caste, occupation, family background, educational levels and economic conditions of women workers and other relevant information.

Table 2: Socio-Economic Profile of Women Workers in Unorganized Manufacturing (N-500)

Sl. No.	Variables	Particulars	Frequency	(In per cent)
1	Marital Status	Married	400	80.1
		Unmarried	70	14.0
		Divorced	10	2.0
		Widowed	20	4.1
2	Age(in years)	Below 20	10	2.0
		20-40	340	68.0
		41-50	60	12.1
		Above 51	90	18.0
3	Education	1-10 Std.	300	60.0
		11-12 Std.	120	24.1
		Bachelor's degree	80	16.1

4	Religion	Hindu	250	50.0
		Christian	100	20.0
		Muslim	150	30.0
5	Place of residence	Urban	350	70.0
		Rural	50	10.1
		Semi-urban	100	20.0
6	Residential status of accommodation	Owned	120	24.1
		Rented	370	74.0
		Others	10	2.0
7	Type of house	Thatched	70	14.0
		Partially tiles	290	58.1
		Asbestos Sheet	120	24.0
		Concrete	20	4.0
8	Suchimuri (Toilet)	Yes	350	70.0
		No	150	30.1
9	Type of family	Nuclear Family	450	90.0
		Joint Family	50	10.1
10	Family Members	2 Nos.	50	10.0
		3 Nos.	150	30.0
		4Nos.	100	20.1
		5Nos.	60	12.0
		More than 6	200	40.0

Source: Primary data, 2021.

Majority of women workers (68 per cent) are from the age group of 20-40 years (Table 2). About 12 per cent of them are middle aged (between 40-51 years). Across the regions, not much variation is noticed worth indicating. Half of the working women (50 per cent) are from Hindu religion; Christians constitute about 20 per cent and Muslims 30 per cent. Almost similar pattern is observed across regions. 80 per cent of the women workers in the study area are married, whereas only 14 per cent of them are unmarried. About 2 per cent and 4 per cent were widowed and divorced respectively. 90 per cent are from nuclear families and the rest 10 per cent are from joint families. The study found that overall, a sizable proportion (40 per cent) of women worker's households consist of 6 and above members, across regions the percentage being almost similar. 70 per cent of the women workers have toilet facilities in their house and only 30 per cent do not have such facilities as they are given application to the local panchayat for allowing them 'Suchimuri'(Toilet).

5.2 Occupation and Income Profile of Women working in the Unorganized Manufacturing Sector

Women make up a greater percentage of workers in "informal" and other precarious forms of employment, which tend to lie outside the purview of labour regulations and inspection, and are therefore, more prone to exploitation. In the

industrialised countries, between 65 and 90 per cent of all part-time workers are women. Women's employment is primarily concentrated in a narrow range of sectors (especially services, where access to jobs is easier but wages are often lower and job security is minimal). Even within those sectors, women find themselves clustered at the lower echelons.

Table 3: Occupation Profile of Women Workers in the Unorganized Sector

Sl. No.	Variables	Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
1	Type of job	Production	250	50.1
		Distribution	150	30.0
		Marketing	50	10.0
		Packing	50	10.0
2	Nature of job	Permanent	50	10.0
		Temporary	200	40.0
		Casual	150	30.1
		Contract basis	100	20.1
3	Years of experience	0-1	50	10.0
		1-3	150	30.1
		3-6	100	20.0
		6-10	75	15.0
		Above 10	50	10.0
4	Mode of payment	Monthly salary	50	10.1
		Weekly payment	250	50.0
		Daily wages	100	20.0
		Piece rate	100	20.1
5	Daily wage rate	0-500	300	60.1
		500-600	75	15.0
		600-800	25	5.0
		800-1000	20	4.1
		Above 1000	80	16.0

Source: Primary data, 2021

In the Manufacturing sector, women are engaged in almost all kinds of activities such as: production, distribution, marketing, and packing. Most of the women work as casual or temporary workers in this sector. This study reveals that about 50 per cent of women workers are working in the production area (Table 3). The remaining 30 per cent are engaged in distribution, 10 per cent are engaged in marketing and the rest are in packing sector. Low income or wage has a dampening effect on female labour force participation rates, with participation rates higher among low-income households largely due to economic necessity. Wage discrimination is the common phenomenon in the Indian Economy. Due to sexual division of labour, women are concentrated jobs such as cleaning, stitching, embroidery, and finishing, tagging, and packaging work. Generally,

lower wage-rate jobs are assigned to women, and higher wage-rate jobs are assigned to men. In this sector also, females are less paid than men. In our observation wages of a female worker is Rs.100 per day less than a male worker. The ongoing per-day wages of female workers are Rs.500 and for a male worker it is Rs.600. In a manufacturing unit, male and female unskilled workers are doing almost the same work, yet female workers get less wages than male workers. It is also noticed through the study that there is a growing gap between male and female LFPR. “Women’s progress in the workforce over the past 10 years has not meant a greater access to quality jobs, nor has it brought an end to discrimination”, says Mary Chinery-Hesse, ILO Deputy Director-General, and leader of the ILO delegation to the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, September 4-15⁹). “Despite gains in some areas, women earn an average of just two-thirds of men’s wages, and they are often denied access to opportunities leading to the best jobs.” These gender gaps are particularly higher in urban unorganized manufacturing areas by about 55 percentage points. In rural areas- in unorganized manufacturing, participation gaps between males and females are on an average around 45 percentage points. Weekly payment is the most common mode of payment for unorganized workers in sample units. It is found that 10 per cent female workers receive monthly salary for their work. 50 per cent women workers receive weekly payment for their work. Piece-rate payment is the mode of payment for 20 per cent female manufacturing workers. About 20 per cent women workers avail daily wages. Slightly more than half of the women workers (52.8 per cent), who work on worksites like construction or brick kilns, have problems of day- care for their children and have no toilet and drinking water facilities. Women are also facing lack of sanitation facilities at the workplace. Gender discrimination at the workplace is subtle and is reflected in the nature of work performed, valuation of the skills, and the technology used by the men and women. Generally, lower wage-rate jobs are assigned to women and higher wage-rate jobs are assigned to men. One serious problem noticed through this study is that many women workers are exploited by the fellow male workers, owners as well as the customers. The women are reluctant to complaint to any of the formal bodies fearing loss of jobs and due to embarrassment caused if the matter is revealed.

5.3 Working Conditions of Women Workers in Unorganized Manufacturing Sector

Women are an extremely disadvantaged position in the society. They are the victims of multiple forms of oppression. This is because they are women and they are occupied in mostly exploited areas of work in the society. Despite the existence of various constitutional and legal provisions guarding women in employment, particularly in the unorganized sector suffer from various disadvantages relating to their working lives as well as in their homes. Women work in the unorganized manufacturing sector mainly for economic

independence. Most women by and large undertake “productive work” only under economic compulsion. Women faced several challenges even before the era of globalization, but these problems have increased several times with the advent of the neo-liberal policies of globalization, liberalization, and privatization. In the era of globalization, working women have become more vulnerable to intense exploitation; they are exposed to more risks and are forced to endure more stress and strain, both physical and mental.

Table 4: Working Conditions of Women Workers in the Unorganized Manufacturing Sector

Sl. No.	Variables	Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Risk to life	Have	400	80.0
		Do not have	100	20.1
2.	Abuse at the workplace	Faced	210	42.0
		Have not Faced	290	58.0
3.	Distance to workplace	5-10	100	20.1
		10-15	250	50.0
		20-25	150	30.1
		Above 25	0	0.0
4.	Access to clear drinking water	Get	220	44.1
		Do not get	280	56.0
5.	Toilet facilities at workplace	Have	200	40.0
		Do not have	300	60.1
6.	Relationships with friends and co-workers	Have	240	40.0
		Do not have	260	60.1
7.	Appreciation of work by Superiors	Appreciated	50	10.0
		Not appreciated	450	90.0
8.	Co-worker praise for the work they do	Yes	350	70.1
		No	150	30.0
9.	Sharing personal problems / issues with co-workers	Share	320	64.0
		Do not share	180	36.1
10.	Sharing of food with others in the workplace	Share	230	46.0
		Do not share	270	54.1

Source: Primary data,2021

In the current study, the working condition of women construction workers in the different age groups have revealed their day-to-day conditions at workplace. Majority of respondents (80 per cent) said that there is no risk to their life at the workplace and 20 per cent are opposite to that view (Table 4). 58 per cent reported not facing abuse at workplace and 42 per cent said that they had faced abuse at their workplace. The minimum distance from the house to workplace

was 5 km whereas -maximum distance was 25 km. Regarding availability of clean drinking water at workplace, majority said (56 per cent) that it is not available but 44 per cent have such facilities in their unit. In the case of toilet facility at workplace, majority of them (60 per cent) said that toilet facility at workplace is not available, whereas 40 per cent said toilet facility is available at their unit. 52 per cent said that they do not have good relation with friends and co-workers whereas, 48 percent responded contradictorily. Only 10 per cent reported that their work was appreciated by supervisor. 70 per cent of the women workers reported to be praised by the co-worker for the work they perform. Regarding sharing personal problems/issues with co-workers, 70 per cent were affirmative and 25 per cent reported in negative. Majority of the women workers were sharing food with their co-workers. In some of the textiles, garments and carpet units, two-thirds of the women revealed that the average duration of maternity leave allowed is for 90 days, but with a loss of pay. Women in the unorganized manufacturing sector do not get any service benefits. The women in this field get a nominal increment as per the whims and fancies of the owners. The facility of provident fund and insurance is limited to only 5 per cent of the workers. Only 10 per cent of women workers received bonus during the Onam festival. So far as the overall condition of the unorganized manufacturing sector women workers is concerned, it is extremely exploitative with no legal recognition as workers, no job security, no social security like old age pension, health insurance or provident fund, entailing long hours of work and non-implementation of the minimum wage norms.

6. Conclusion

Female labour force participation in India is lower than many other emerging market economies. Moreover, there is a large gap in the LFPRs of men and women in India. This gender gap should be narrowed to get full benefit from India's demographic dividend. In addition, a related literature also finds that greater economic contribution of women leads to higher economic growth (Okorie,(2013). A number of policy initiatives could be used to address this gender gap in the Indian labour force participation. To close the gap in women's LFPR, the Indian government should offer incentives for better pay, training, skills acquisition, and job quotes to prospective employers to encourage hiring of women. Life welfare audits, monitoring and evaluation research needs to be undertaken to assess the effectiveness of different schemes being run for the welfare of the unorganized women workers. In addition, supply-side reforms to improve infrastructure and to address other constraints to job creation could also enable more women to enter labour force. Finally, higher social spending, including investment in education, can also lead to higher female LFPR by boosting female stocks of human capital.

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