



INVISIBLE LABOUR: THE CHALLENGES OF WOMEN IN THE UNORGANISED SECTOR IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Invisible Labour is used in the context of work that is underrated, not recognised and not included in the measurement statistics of an economy. This has been observed with reference to women employed in the unorganised sector in India., where there is overlapping of unpaid care work and domestic responsibilities. This research paper examines the socio-economic constraints faced by women in the informal sector through the focus on invisible labour. The report brings to light the significant challenges like gender based wage discrimination, insecurity in jobs, low and irregular wage payments, lack of access to social security measures and unsafe working conditions for women in the unorganised sectors through evaluation of extensive use of secondary data and government reports. The research study highlights the extensive economic vulnerabilities of women labour and exclusion from both economic data and undervaluation of unpaid care work in the social structures. The paper concludes with the emphasis on the urgent need of effective gender-sensitive labour policies, comprehensive social security coverage and societal recognition of unpaid work to ensure inclusive development and economic justice.

Keywords: Invisible Labour, Unorganised Sector, Women Workers, Informal Employment, Gender Inequality, Unpaid Care Work.

I. INTRODUCTION

Invisible labour refers to vital tasks and responsibilities that go unseen, unrecognised and undervalued, even though they are essential to the smooth functioning of households, economies and organisations. It encompasses the underpaid or unpaid and unnoticed, mental, physical and emotional work of managing a household and providing care. Working women, particularly those with young children in a domestic setting, disproportionately shoulder this burden, which can lead to significant psychological strain. The International Labor Organization reports in 2025 highlight that ‘48.7% of women globally are financially active and engaged as the labor force’. However, women still carry out at least two and a half times more unpaid household and care work than men (UN Women, 2016). ‘They bear a lack of reasonable burden of invisible labor, whether it is cooking or caring for the children and the elderly at home’.

“In the Indian context, invisible labour includes women who undertake unregistered home-based piece-rate work, domestic workers whose contributions fall outside formal labour statistics, and the unpaid care responsibilities of women that sustain both homes and economies but remain uncouned in national measures”.

The concepts of invisible labour and the unorganised sector are deeply interconnected in the Indian context, especially as far as women’s work is concerned. The unorganised or informal sector is characterised by employment that lacks formal contracts, social security, regulatory oversight, clear employer-employee relationships and, often, stable wages. Meanwhile, invisible labour refers to work that is unrecognised, under-accounted in official statistics, undervalued socially and economically, and frequently unpaid or underpaid. When women undertake work that is both informal (unorganised) and invisible, they find themselves in a large but largely un-recognised workforce—crucial to the economy yet vulnerable in multiple ways.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

“Women are the backbone of our country, but women do face many problems in our country owing to the ill custom prevailing within the country.” A study by the “Sharma Shakti Report on Self-employed Women in the Informal Sector” (1988) states that women in the country are highly vulnerable to the conditions in which they work, the discriminations faced by women in different occupations, health hazards faced by women, etc. Women do worry about the family and children. Women do have some fundamental things to look for, but owing to the lack of proper resources, they are not able to do the things properly, which makes them look for jobs to do. This is one of the hardest parts for the women, to find a job, since women do not have proper financial support to start any kind of self-employment or job. But the solution to the problem would be to join the unorganized sector. The supply of labour by women is also affected by some social and economic aspects, and this affects the labour supply by women by depending on some facilitating aspects rather than the rate of pay that can be received by them while entering the supply side of the labor market, i.e., some facilitating aspects will include a number of children, age of children, kinds of family, family size, family

health, nature and types of work, etc., and if these aspects are facilitating, then the pay rate will not affect the supply side of labor anymore.

Craig and Churchill (2021) have observed that, even in dual income households, the mental load of childcare and household coordination is primarily taken up by women.

The unorganized sector forms one of the most important parts of the economy in India, wherein over 90 per cent of the domestic production is accounted for by the unorganised sector. Within this sector, women represent a large and growing proportion of workers — yet their labour remains largely invisible in formal statistics, undervalued in economic terms, and inadequately protected by labour laws and social security frameworks.

The term “invisible labour” captures this dual invisibility - first, women’s work in the unorganised sector is often not counted or formally recognised; second, the combination of paid labour and unpaid care or domestic work compounds their burden and remains largely hidden in policy and discourse. This paper focuses on the major constraints faced by women in the unorganised sectors, investigating the underlying causes in the social structure and recommends practical policies to make the work done by women visible and recognised in the broad economic dynamics.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is rooted in observational studies and data driven research based on empirical research. The population studies includes the unpaid or underpaid domestic workers, women workers in informal paid work and unpaid care labour in India. The secondary data has been collected and analysed from reports by International Labour Organisation, online journals, government reports, newspapers and periodicals. The research is centered around gaining insights into the nature of employment of women as invisible labour in the Indian Economy.

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The research study is based on the below key objectives:

1. To estimate the nature and extent of invisible labour in the unorganised sectors in India.
2. To assess the socio-economic challenges faced by the women workers due to unpaid care work and employment in the informal sector.
3. To discuss the consequences of invisible women labour on workforce participation, security of incomes and aspects of gender inequality.
4. To evaluate existing labour policies and social security measures aiming to address the challenges related to women in the unorganised sectors.

5. To make policy suggestions for effective recognition, valuation and integration of invisible labour in India's development frameworks.

V. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION: WOMEN IN THE UNORGANISED SECTOR

Women in India are concentrated in low-paying and insecure occupations such as agriculture, domestic work, home-based manufacturing, construction, and street vending.

Women in the unorganised sector face several challenges including wage discrimination, lack of income security, limited or almost no social protection, insecure and unsafe working conditions, social vulnerability and marginalisation.

TABLE 1: PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN - SECTOR-WISE IN THE UNORGANISED SECTOR

Sector	Share of Women Workers (%)
Agriculture	55
Domestic work	80
Home-based manufacturing	70
Construction	30
Street Vending	40

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), MoSPI, Government of India

These patterns reflect socio-economic structural constraints such as lack of access to formal education, ownership of assets, and labour mobility.

TABLE 2: GENDER GAP IN PAY BURDEN

Type of Work	Men (hrs/day)	Women (hrs/day)
Paid Work	6.1	4.2
Unpaid Work	1.2	5.6
Total Work	7.3	9.8

Source: Time Use Survey (TUS), MoSPI; UN Women

The data in Table 2, clearly indicates lack of women's proportionate workload and their marginalisation through time poverty.

Invisible labour leads to lack of true estimation of GDP, lower labour productivity, limitations of female labour force participation, and continual gender inequality. Women's time poverty restricts opportunities for skill development and formal employment, thereby reinforcing cycles of poverty.

VI. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN WORKERS IN INDIA

Several restrictions and issues confront women workers in the informal sector as a result of their general role in their workplaces as well as discrimination due to their gender. These problems and challenges include-

1. **Low Wages:** Women in the informal labour market are systematically underpaid compared to their male peers. The lack of enforceable minimum wage provisions and the weak bargaining position of women in unorganized labour markets exacerbate income insecurity, making it difficult for them to achieve financial stability. National statistics reveal that women earn approximately 30-40% less than men across various unorganised sectors.

Most women working in informal jobs don't have a permanent and regular income, their work comes and goes. It depends on the season, demand or random orders. Because there is no secure job or formal agreement, money comes irregularly. As a result, there is no saving, no social protection, and no way to plan ahead.

2. **Exploitation and Harassment:** Women employed in the unorganised sector frequently face exploitation and abuse; lacking formal protections, they are particularly exposed to harassment, unsafe working environments, and other forms of mistreatment. They may be subjected to unfair treatment, verbal or physical abuse, and sexual harassment at work and because legal safeguards are weak or inaccessible, combined with the fear of reprisal, many women find it impossible to report these violations or obtain justice.
3. **Absence of Job Security:** Women workers in the unorganised sector face lack of security in their employment. They are employed on a casual basis without formal contracts, which makes them vulnerable to erratic job loss, random termination, and lower income. This persistent insecurity in jobs erodes their monetary stability and makes it extremely difficult for them to systematically plan for the future.
4. **Lack of Access to Social Security:** Unorganized women lack access to social security facilities such as health insurance, maternity leave, and pension facilities. The lack of proper access to social security is an alarming issue, and these unorganized women lack proper safety nets regarding financial crises due to health, emergency, or old age issues.

5. **Unsafety and unhealthily working conditions:** Women in the informal sector often labor under hazardous and unsanitary conditions, without proper sanitation, equipment for protection, or work safety to protect them from serious occupational risks, injuries, and adverse health consequences in the long run.
6. **Inequality of Opportunities and Discrimination:** The discrimination faced by women on grounds of gender still persists, and unequal opportunities to learn and grow and reach higher positions continue to remain a barrier to the development and progress of female individuals working in the unorganised sector
7. **Lack of education:** The illiteracy amongst women belonging to the unorganized sector is tightly coupled with early age commencement of working, which obviously deprives them of schooling.
8. **Inadequate skill & knowledge:** Most of the women are devoid of proper training and skills that match their work. As a result, there is too much stress and inefficient working.

VII. POLICY SUGGESTIONS FOR UPLIFTMENT OF WOMEN IN UNORGANIZED SECTOR

To uplift women in the unorganized sector with the aim of improving their socio-economic conditions, the following suggestions can be considered:

1. **Promoting Skill Development:** Arrangements need to be made to provide facilities to women in the unorganized sector to participate in women-specific skill development courses. After such courses, women may become skilled in many trades, be entrepreneurs, and participate in self-employment.
2. **Promote Enhanced Credit Accessibility:** Affordable and inclusive financing channels should be created for the women in the informal sector to become self-employed, purchase productive assets, and meet unforeseen financial demands.
3. **Encouraging the development and creation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) among women:** Self-Help Groups formed among and across women can act as potential vehicles to provide a platform to the latter on various fronts, such as collective savings and acquiring credit as well as a platform to pool skills and bargain together as a group.
4. **Strengthening Social Security Measures –** The social security provisions need to extend their reach and include women working in the unorganized sector. Here again, issues like health care facilities, maternity benefits, old-age pensions, and insurance need consideration.
5. **Ensure Implementation and Enforce Labour Laws:** The enforcement of labour laws should be strengthened to ensure compliance with labour laws in the unorganized sector. In this regard, provisions for ensuring minimum wages, safety at workplaces, avoiding discrimination or harassment at the workplace, etc., can be included.

6. Promote Entrepreneurship and Microenterprises: Encourage women to pursue Microenterprises by providing them with support and incentives. This can enable them to be independent economic agents and thus empowered individuals in society.
7. Enhance Access to Education and Training: Equal and better access to education and training must be facilitated for girls and women working in the unorganised sector to ensure they have the necessary knowledge and training to take up better-paid and dignified alternative jobs.
8. Create Awareness/Sensitize Stakeholders: Organize campaigns to create awareness about the rights and contributions of women in the unorganized sector among employers, employees, and the general public. Encourage employers to create an environment with zero tolerance for harassment, promoting women-friendly policies to create an empowering atmosphere for women.
9. Empower Support Systems: Counselling facilities, helplines, and support networks can be set up to help women workers overcome problems of exploitation, harassment, and access to legal redress. In fact, support systems can offer guidance, protection, and advocacy for women's rights.
10. Foster Collaboration and Partnerships: Encourage collaboration among government agencies, civil society organizations, employers, and trade unions in preparing comprehensive programmes and initiatives in the area of women's empowerment in the unorganized sector; collective efforts can have a greater impact, leading to long-term change.

VIII. CONCLUSION

It is, therefore, concluded that the women in the unorganized sector face a multitude of challenges and vulnerabilities that also create obstacles to their socio-economic progress and overall well-being. The issues they face involve low wages, exploitation, lack of job security, no social protection, unsafe working conditions, discrimination, and the added pressure of balancing work and family responsibilities. But with specific interventions and policy measures, women in the unorganized sector can certainly be uplifted, and their livelihoods can be improved. Efforts must be directed towards skill development programs, increasing access to credit, stimulating the formation of self-help groups, and strengthening social security measures in favor of women in the unorganized sector. Implementation and enforcement of labor laws, including minimum wages, safe working conditions, and protection against discrimination and harassment, are of essence.

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