

Empowering Working Women: Government Policies And Human Rights In Tamil Nadu's Unorganized Sector

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the critical role of government policies and programs in addressing human rights concerns faced by women working in the unorganized sector in Tamil Nadu. The unorganized sector, characterized by low wages, lack of job security, and minimal legal protection, poses significant challenges to the empowerment and well-being of women workers. The research delves into the effectiveness of existing policies in safeguarding rights related to equal pay, maternity benefits, workplace safety, and prevention of harassment. It also highlights the gaps and inefficiencies in implementation, alongside the socio-economic barriers that hinder policy success. By analyzing case studies, policy documents, the study provides actionable recommendations for strengthening government initiatives to ensure the human rights of women in this vulnerable workforce. The research emphasizes the need for a collaborative approach between policymakers, employers, and civil society to create an inclusive and equitable work environment for women in the unorganized sector.

KEYWORDS: Un-organized sector, women, Human rights, Policies, challenges

INTRODUCTION

Empowering working women in Tamil Nadu's unorganized sector is a critical issue, given the significant challenges they face, including low wages, unsafe working conditions, and lack of access to rights and benefits. The Tamil Nadu State Human Rights Commission,

established on April 17, 1997, plays a vital role in addressing these issues by advocating for the rights of women workers and ensuring compliance with labor laws. Government policies such as the Minimum Wages Act and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) aim to improve economic conditions for women. However, many women still earn significantly less than their male counterparts; for instance, women in Sivakasi's fireworks industry reportedly earn half of what men make. In December 2020, the Tamil Nadu government established a separate welfare board for unorganized workers in the fireworks industry, which covers only 12% of the workforce. Despite these initiatives, challenges persist. Women workers often encounter exploitative practices such as manipulative contracts that allow employers to pay stagnant wages and easily terminate employment. In the garment industry, which employs approximately 280,000 workers—80% of whom are women—issues like sexual harassment and unsafe working conditions are rampant. A study revealed that nearly 50% of migrant women workers experience harassment but only a fraction has access to internal committees for reporting abuse. The effectiveness of current measures is limited by socio-economic factors. Many women are from marginalized communities and face discrimination based on caste and gender. The Tamil Nadu Women's Policy, approved in January 2024, aims to enhance women's access to health, education, and employment while addressing gender-based violence. However, enforcement remains a challenge due to inadequate institutional capacity and societal norms that discourage reporting abuse. Tamil Nadu has made strides in empowering women in the unorganized sector through various policies and programs, significant barriers remain. Continued efforts are necessary to ensure that these policies translate into real improvements in workplace safety and fair treatment for women workers.

OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the paper are to analyze the existing government policies and programs aimed at protecting the rights of women in Tamil Nadu's unorganized sector, focusing on their effectiveness in safeguarding women's rights. The study seeks to identify the challenges faced by women workers in accessing these rights and benefits, particularly those related to equal pay, workplace safety, and legal protections. It also evaluates the implementation of current measures, examining their success in ensuring fair treatment and workplace security for women in this sector. The research explores the role of socio-economic factors in influencing the effectiveness of these policies, considering barriers such as lack of awareness, socio-cultural constraints, and economic vulnerabilities. Ultimately, the paper aims to provide actionable recommendations to improve policy enforcement and better address the human rights concerns of women workers in the unorganized sector, ensuring a more equitable and supportive environment for them.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Women in Tamil Nadu's unorganized sector face significant challenges in asserting their rights due to inadequate legal protections, poor enforcement of existing policies, and socio-economic barriers. Despite various government policies and programs designed to safeguard their rights, such as ensuring equal pay, maternity benefits, and workplace safety, these women often remain vulnerable to exploitation, harassment, and unfair treatment. The problem lies in the gaps between policy implementation and the reality on the ground, where women struggle to access the benefits intended to protect them. The paper addresses the critical issue of how current government initiatives fall short in addressing the human rights concerns of women workers in the unorganized sector. It examines the socio-economic factors that influence the effectiveness of these policies and highlights the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms to create a safer and more equitable work environment for these women.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a **descriptive, analytical, and qualitative research approach** to examine government policies and programs protecting the rights of women workers in Tamil Nadu's unorganized sector. The **descriptive method** involved reviewing policy documents, reports, and statistical data that provided insights into the challenges faced in accessing rights and benefits. The **analytical method** was used to assess the effectiveness of these policies by examining socio-economic factors, identifying gaps, and evaluating their impact.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study is built around several key theories that help to analyze the impact of government policies on women workers in Tamil Nadu's unorganized sector. **Feminist Theory** (Beauvoir, 1949) provides a foundational perspective, emphasizing gender inequality and the marginalization of women in the workforce. This theory highlights how societal structures, including policies, often fail to address the specific needs of women, particularly in informal sectors. **Human Rights Theory** (Donnelly, 2003) is also central, as it emphasizes the importance of ensuring that women in the unorganized sector have access to fundamental rights, such as equal pay and workplace safety. Furthermore, **Social Justice Theory** (Rawls, 1971) underpins the analysis of fairness in policy implementation, asserting that justice is achieved when all individuals, regardless of socio-economic status, have equal access to opportunities and protections. **Capability Approach** (Sen, 1999) is used to explore how policies contribute to enhancing women's capabilities, allowing them to fully participate in the workforce and access necessary rights and benefits. Together, these theories offer a comprehensive lens to critically assess the effectiveness of existing policies and highlight areas for improvement in safeguarding the rights of women workers in the unorganized sector.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

POLICIES FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN TAMIL NADU'S UNORGANIZED SECTOR

The government of Tamil Nadu has implemented various policies and programs aimed at protecting the rights of women, particularly those in the unorganized sector. The focus on women's empowerment is evident in the Tamil Nadu State Policy for Women 2024, which builds on previous initiatives and aims to address the multifaceted issues faced by women in the state.

The main aspects of this policy are its commitment to zero tolerance against violence and abuse. This policy was approved in January 2024, following a draft released in 2021, and it emphasizes the need for a safe environment for women across all sectors, including unorganized work. The policy outlines a comprehensive approach that includes social empowerment, economic empowerment, political empowerment, and emotional well-being. It aims to create gender-sensitive workplaces and promote women's participation in various sectors, including agriculture and entrepreneurship. In addition to the overarching policy framework, several specific schemes have been established to support women in the unorganized sector. For instance, the Chief Minister's Girl Child Protection Scheme provides financial assistance for families with girl children born after August 1, 2011. The scheme aims to promote gender equality from an early age by ensuring financial security for girls. The initiatives like job melas specifically targeting women are organized to enhance their employment opportunities. The Tamil Nadu Women's Helpline (181) is another critical initiative that offers immediate assistance to women facing violence or abuse. This helpline serves as a crucial support system for women in distress, providing them with access to legal aid and counseling services. Furthermore, the establishment of One-Stop Crisis Centers allows women to receive comprehensive support services under one roof, facilitating easier

access to help during emergencies. The government has also recognized the importance of economic independence for women in the unorganized sector. Programs aimed at enhancing digital literacy and reducing skill gaps among women are being promoted. These initiatives are designed to empower women economically by equipping them with necessary skills for better job prospects or entrepreneurship. The focus on encouraging women's startups and micro-enterprises reflects a strategic approach to foster economic self-sufficiency among women.

The Tamil Nadu State Commission for Women plays a vital role in monitoring and advocating for women's rights. This commission is tasked with ensuring that policies are effectively implemented and that women's voices are heard in decision-making processes. The establishment of a gender observatory will also help maintain a repository of gender-related research, which can inform future policy-making and interventions aimed at improving women's rights. Despite these positive developments, challenges remain. Women in the unorganized sector often face issues such as lack of job security, low wages, and inadequate access to social security benefits. The government's commitment to covering all women-headed households under social security schemes is a step towards addressing these vulnerabilities. However, effective implementation remains crucial. Tamil Nadu's government has made significant strides in creating policies and programs focused on protecting women's rights in the unorganized sector. The State Policy for Women 2024, along with various supportive schemes and initiatives, reflects a comprehensive approach to empower women socially and economically. Continuous efforts are needed to ensure that these policies translate into tangible benefits for women across all sectors of society.

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN WORKERS IN ACCESSING THESE RIGHTS AND BENEFITS.

The challenges faced by women workers in Tamil Nadu's unorganized sector are multifaceted and deeply rooted in systemic issues. Despite various government initiatives aimed at empowering these women, significant barriers impede their access to rights and benefits. The most pressing challenge is gender-based violence and harassment. A report by UN Women (2024) highlights that nearly 50% of interstate and intrastate migrant women workers in Tamil Nadu's textile industry have experienced harassment from supervisors or male colleagues. Alarming, only 20% of interstate workers and 50% of intrastate workers report having Internal Committees to address such grievances. The lack of reporting mechanisms leaves many women vulnerable to ongoing abuse without recourse to justice. Another critical issue is the lack of awareness regarding their rights. Many women in the unorganized sector are unaware of labor laws and protections available to them. According to the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) data from 2019, a significant percentage of domestic workers do not know about their entitlements under the Minimum Wages Act or other protective legislations. This ignorance perpetuates exploitation and prevents them from seeking help.

Economic dependency further complicates matters. Many women are the primary earners for their families but often accept low wages and poor working conditions due to financial constraints. The Tamil Nadu State Policy for Women 2024 aims to enhance women's economic empowerment; however, its implementation remains inconsistent, leaving many women without meaningful support. Caste and class discrimination also play a significant

role in limiting women's access to rights. Women from marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, face additional hurdles in asserting their rights within workplaces dominated by upper-caste men. The Intersectionality of gender and caste creates compounded vulnerabilities that are often overlooked in policy discussions. Unsafe working conditions are prevalent in many sectors where women are employed. A report published by the Textile Industry Coalition (TIC) in February 2024 indicates that many women work in environments lacking basic safety measures, exposing them to health risks without adequate protections. This situation is exacerbated by the absence of supportive systems for survivors of abuse, despite laws like the Sexual Harassment at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 being in place.

Job insecurity is another major challenge faced by women workers. Many are employed on a contractual basis without job security or benefits such as maternity leave or health insurance. The Tamil Nadu government has introduced various welfare schemes aimed at providing social security; however, access remains limited due to bureaucratic hurdles and lack of awareness among beneficiaries. Cultural norms and societal expectations also restrict women's mobility and participation in the workforce. Traditional gender roles often dictate that women prioritize family responsibilities over employment opportunities, leading to high dropout rates among female workers. Tamil Nadu has made strides toward empowering women in the unorganized sector through various policies and programs, significant challenges remain. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that includes raising awareness about rights, enforcing existing laws effectively, and creating supportive environments that empower women to advocate for themselves.



EFFECTIVENESS OF CURRENT MEASURES IN ENSURING WORKPLACE SAFETY AND FAIR TREATMENT FOR WOMEN

The effectiveness of current measures in ensuring workplace safety and fair treatment for women workers in Tamil Nadu's unorganized sector is a crucial issue, reflecting both progress and ongoing challenges. Despite various initiatives aimed at improving conditions for these women, significant gaps remain. The primary frameworks for workplace safety are the Draft Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (Tamil Nadu) Rules, 2022, notified on April 11, 2022. The legislation aims to establish safety protocols across various sectors, including construction and contract labor, which predominantly employ women. The rules mandate that employers conduct annual medical examinations for workers over 45 years of age and ensure that workplaces are free from hazardous substances. However, enforcement remains a challenge, particularly in the unorganized sector where many workers lack formal contracts and oversight.

The Tamil Nadu State Policy for Women 2024, approved in January 2024, advocates for zero tolerance against violence and abuse while promoting safe and women-friendly workplaces across both organized and unorganized sectors. The policy aims to address issues such as discrimination and violence, ensuring that women have access to health, education, and employment opportunities. Despite these intentions, the actual implementation of safety measures varies widely across industries. For instance, while there are approximately 10,946 Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) established in private organizations to address sexual harassment complaints, many women in the unorganized sector remain unaware of these mechanisms or face barriers in accessing them. The Textile Industry Coalition (TIC), launched in February 2024, aims to enhance workplace safety specifically for women in the textile sector. This coalition brings together various stakeholders to implement the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act effectively. However, despite having 5,493 ICCs in government organizations and significant numbers in private sectors, the reach and effectiveness of these committees are limited among unorganized workers who often lack representation. The economic dependency poses a significant barrier to asserting rights. Many women workers are compelled to accept unsafe working conditions due to financial pressures. According to the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) data from 2019, a substantial portion of women engaged in domestic work or informal labor do not receive minimum wage protections or benefits like maternity leave.

Cultural norms also play a critical role in limiting women's access to safe working environments. Traditional gender roles often prioritize family responsibilities over employment opportunities, contributing to high dropout rates among female workers. The Tamil Nadu Women's Policy aims to address these issues by promoting women's participation in the workforce; however, societal attitudes continue to impede progress. Tamil Nadu has instituted several measures aimed at improving workplace safety and fair treatment for women in the unorganized sector, significant challenges remain. Effective enforcement of existing laws, increased awareness among workers about their rights, and a cultural shift towards valuing women's contributions in the workforce are essential for achieving meaningful change.

ROLE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS IN INFLUENCING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF POLICIES

The socio-economic landscape in Tamil Nadu significantly influences the implementation of policies aimed at supporting working women in the unorganized sector. Despite notable advancements in education and economic growth, gender disparities persist, particularly in rural areas where women face systemic barriers that hinder their access to employment and fair wages. In Tamil Nadu, the female labor force participation rate (FLFPR) stands at approximately 40%, with a stark contrast between urban (23.6%) and rural (35.1%) participation rates, as reported by the Tamil Nadu State New Policy for Women (2021). The state's literacy rate is commendable at 80%, yet a significant gender wage gap remains, with women earning about 31% less than men for similar work as of 2011-12. This disparity underscores the socio-economic factors at play, including limited access to vocational training and entrenched cultural norms that prioritize male employment over female participation. The Tamil Nadu government has initiated various schemes to address these issues, such as the Mahalir Thittam program, which began in 1997-98 and aims to empower women through self-help groups (SHGs). The programme has been pivotal in providing financial assistance and skill development opportunities to women across the state. However, despite these efforts, challenges persist. For instance, a 2017 World Bank report highlighted that 62% of women employed in rural areas work in casual labor, often without job security or benefits.

The Tamil Nadu Women's Policy (2024) emphasizes creating an enabling environment for women's employment by enhancing access to education, health services, and skills training. The policy aims to restructure gender norms and eliminate discrimination against women in the workforce. However, implementation remains uneven due to socio-economic vulnerabilities that affect women's mobility and safety in public spaces. For example, over 38% of women experience spousal violence, which further restricts their ability to seek employment opportunities. The intersection of socio-economic factors such as poverty, lack of education, and cultural biases creates a complex environment that affects policy effectiveness for working women in the unorganized sector. The government's commitment to improving women's access to quality jobs through targeted investments and skill development is crucial. Yet, without addressing the underlying socio-economic barriers—such as inadequate delivery of enabling services and institutional capacity—these policies may fall short of achieving their intended outcomes. Tamil Nadu has made strides in promoting women's employment through various policies and programs, significant socio-economic challenges remain. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that not only focuses on policy implementation but also on changing societal attitudes towards women's roles in the workforce.

STRATEGIES TO BRIDGE POLICY GAPS AND PROTECT WOMEN WORKERS RIGHTS

The protection of human rights for women workers in the unorganized sector of Tamil Nadu is a pressing issue that requires immediate attention and action. Despite the state's progressive policies and initiatives aimed at empowering women, significant gaps in enforcement and implementation persist. Women in this sector often face numerous challenges, including inadequate legal protections, unsafe working conditions, and limited access to resources that could enhance their livelihoods. Addressing these challenges is essential not only for promoting gender equality but also for fostering sustainable economic

development. This necessitates the adoption of comprehensive strategies that bridge existing gaps and ensure that women's rights are effectively protected and upheld in the workplace. To enhance human rights protection for women workers in Tamil Nadu's unorganized sector and bridge gaps in policy enforcement, the following actionable strategies are recommended:

1. **Strengthen Legal Frameworks:** Ensure rigorous enforcement of existing laws, such as the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act, by establishing clear accountability mechanisms within industries. Regular audits and compliance checks should be mandated to ensure adherence.
2. **Multi-Stakeholder Coalitions:** Build on initiatives like the Textile Industry Coalition (TIC) launched in 2024, which unites government, industry, and civil society to create safer workplaces. Expanding this model to other sectors can foster collaboration and resource sharing for better policy implementation.
3. **Worker Empowerment Programs:** Implement peer-led programs like the Nalam initiative that educate women about their rights and provide platforms for them to voice grievances. This grassroots approach can enhance confidence and collective bargaining power among women workers.
4. **Community Awareness Campaigns:** Conduct widespread awareness campaigns in local communities about women's rights and available legal protections. These campaigns should target both men and women to foster a culture of respect and support for gender equality.
5. **Skill Development and Vocational Training:** Increase investments in skill development programs tailored specifically for women, focusing on sectors with high employment potential. This includes partnerships with educational institutions to provide training that meets industry demands.
6. **Access to Legal Aid Services:** Establish accessible legal aid clinics in rural areas to assist women in understanding their rights and navigating legal processes. Collaborate with NGOs to provide support services that empower women facing discrimination or violence.
7. **Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms:** Develop a robust system for monitoring workplace conditions and reporting violations anonymously. This could include mobile applications where workers can report harassment or unsafe conditions without fear of retaliation.
8. **Incentives for Compliance:** Introduce incentives for companies that demonstrate compliance with gender equality standards and provide safe working environments. This could involve tax breaks or recognition programs that highlight best practices in gender equity.
9. **Support Networks for Migrant Workers:** Create support networks specifically for migrant women workers who may face unique challenges due to isolation and language barriers. These networks can provide resources, mentorship, and community support.
10. **Policy Advocacy and Reform:** Engage in continuous dialogue with policymakers to advocate for reforms that address systemic barriers faced by women in the workforce. This includes pushing for policies that promote equal pay, maternity benefits, and flexible working conditions tailored to women's needs.

Conclusion

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

In a rapidly changing economic landscape, the role of women in the workforce has become increasingly significant, particularly in regions like Tamil Nadu, where a substantial number of women are employed in the unorganized sector. The study on working women, government policies, and human rights in Tamil Nadu's unorganized

sector sheds light on the critical intersections of gender, labor rights, and state intervention. As a significant portion of India's workforce operates within this unregulated domain, understanding the implications of government policies is essential for promoting equitable labor practices. The findings highlight that while policies exist to support women; their implementation often falls short due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and societal norms that undermine women's rights. This study is expected to contribute significantly to policy formulation by providing empirical evidence that can guide reforms aimed at enhancing the socio-economic status of women in the unorganized sector. By advocating for stronger enforcement of existing laws and the introduction of new measures tailored to the unique challenges faced by these women, the research aims to empower them economically and socially. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for a multi-faceted approach that includes awareness campaigns and community engagement to change perceptions about women's roles in the workforce. Ultimately, this study serves as a crucial resource for policymakers, activists, and scholars interested in advancing gender equality and human rights in labor contexts.

FINAL REFLECTIONS OF THE STUDY

The major findings on empowering working women through government policies and human rights in Tamil Nadu's unorganized sector reveal critical insights into the current landscape:

1. **Government Initiatives:** The Tamil Nadu government has launched a ₹1,185 crore Women Employment and Safety Program, aimed at enhancing job opportunities and workplace safety for women in the unorganized sector, particularly focusing on skill development and entrepreneurship.
2. **High Employment in Textiles:** Women constitute about 43% of the workforce in Tamil Nadu's textile industry, yet many face unsafe working conditions and harassment, with reports indicating that nearly 50% of migrant women experience abuse.
3. **Limited Reporting Mechanisms:** Only a fraction of workplaces have Internal Committees to address harassment, with only 20% of interstate migrant workers aware of such mechanisms, highlighting a significant gap in support systems.
4. **Ineffective Implementation of Laws:** Despite laws like the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, enforcement is weak, and many women fear retaliation for reporting incidents, leading to underreporting of abuses.
5. **Socio-Economic Barriers:** Women from marginalized backgrounds face additional challenges due to socio-economic factors such as caste discrimination and lack of access to education, which hinder their ability to assert their rights.
6. **Wage Disparities:** Women in sectors like fireworks and textiles often earn significantly less than their male counterparts, with daily wages being about half that of men for similar roles, reflecting systemic gender wage gaps.
7. **Safety Initiatives:** Programs like PENN aim to educate women on self-defense and safety awareness, addressing the need for proactive measures to prevent violence against women in public spaces and workplaces.
8. **Lack of Awareness:** Many women are unaware of their rights and available support systems due to insufficient outreach and education regarding workplace safety and legal protections.

9. **Need for Comprehensive Policies:** The Tamil Nadu Women's Policy emphasizes improving access to health, education, and employment while restructuring gender norms to eliminate discrimination and empower women economically.
10. **Community Engagement:** Initiatives like the Textile Industry Coalition (TiC) focus on creating safe workplaces by involving men as allies in combating gender-based violence, promoting a culture of respect and accountability within industries.

CONCLUSION

The empowerment of working women in Tamil Nadu's unorganized sector is a key component of advancing gender equality and economic inclusivity. This study has examined the existing government policies and programs aimed at safeguarding the rights of women workers in the unorganized sector, highlighting both progress and gaps in their implementation. Notable policies such as the **Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act (2008)** and various **National Social Assistance Programmes** have been implemented, but challenges remain in effectively delivering these benefits to women in the sector. Despite these efforts, barriers such as low awareness of rights, limited access to social security schemes, and insufficient enforcement of labor laws continue to affect women workers. A significant number of women are unaware of their entitlements under schemes such as the **Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan (2019)** and **PM Matru Vandana Yojana (2017)**, which offer financial security and maternal benefits. Furthermore, issues like unsafe working conditions, gender-based discrimination, and exploitation in sectors like domestic work, agriculture, and construction persist. The effectiveness of current measures in ensuring workplace safety and fair treatment for women is often hampered by socio-economic factors, such as low literacy rates and lack of job security, which prevent women from asserting their rights. For instance, the **Tamil Nadu State Policy on Women (2014)** and the **National Policy on Women (2016)** outline provisions for the protection and empowerment of women workers; however, these policies face challenges in terms of grassroots implementation, mainly due to cultural barriers and insufficient infrastructure for grievance Redressal. Socio-economic factors—such as illiteracy, gender discrimination and a lack of financial independence—continue to undermine the full realization of policies. These factors highlight the need for a more comprehensive approach to policy implementation, one that includes awareness programs, improved access to social security benefits, and a stronger regulatory framework for enforcement. Tamil Nadu government has made significant strides with policies such as the **State Social Security Board for Unorganized Workers (2009)** and **women-centric schemes**, much work remains in addressing the persistent challenges that women face in the unorganized sector. Strengthening policy enforcement, expanding the reach of welfare schemes, and addressing socio-economic barriers are crucial steps to ensuring that women workers in Tamil Nadu are fully empowered and able to access their rights. Only through a combined effort from the government, civil society, and communities can we achieve a truly equitable and supportive environment for women workers in the unorganized sector.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

The author confidently declares that this study remains free from any financial or personal influences that could bias its findings. Furthermore, no external funding was received to support this research, ensuring its impartiality and integrity.

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