



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**Sociology**

**GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN WORKERS IN THE UNORGANISED SECTOR: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

**KEY WORDS:** Gender-Based Violence, Unorganised Sector, Workplace Exploitation, Women Workers, Informal Labour.

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**ABSTRACT**

The unorganised sector, which employs a large proportion of women in India, remains one of the most vulnerable and least protected segments of the workforce. This study investigates the prevalence, forms, and impacts of gender-based violence (GBV) and exploitation among women workers in urban areas of Chennai. Using primary data collected from 50 respondents through structured interviews, the research reveals widespread exposure to wage discrimination, sexual harassment, verbal and physical abuse, and other forms of workplace violence. Findings highlight the lack of effective grievance redressal mechanisms, the complicity of both male and female employers in exploitation, and the urgent need for policy interventions to ensure gender equity and workplace safety.

**Statement OfThe Problems**

The unorganised sector constitutes a significant portion of the workforce in developing countries like India, employing millions of women in insecure, low-paid, and informal jobs. Women working in this sector face a triple burden of poverty, gender discrimination, and workplace violence. Unlike the formal sector, the unorganised workforce lacks legal protection, grievance redressal mechanisms, and institutional support.

Workplace violence against women in this sector is largely invisible, under-reported, and often normalized. It ranges from wage theft, verbal abuse, and physical harassment to coercion for sexual favors and job insecurity. The absence of contracts, social security, and union representation leaves women especially vulnerable.

This study aims to explore the extent, forms, perpetrators, and impact of workplace violence experienced by women in the unorganised sector and seeks to identify strategies for prevention and policy intervention.

**Objectives**

1. To analyze the socio-economic conditions that increase women's vulnerability to such violence.
2. To identify the different forms of workplace violence experienced by women in the unorganised sector.
3. To examine the coping mechanisms and support systems used by women to address violence.
4. To recommend policy measures and interventions for prevention and protection of women workers.

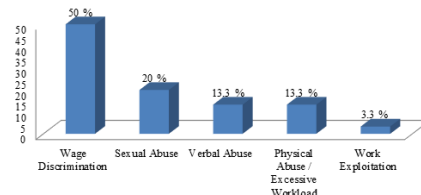
**Methodology**

The study adopted a descriptive research design to examine workplace violence against women in the unorganised sector. A total of 50 working women were selected as the sample from two urban areas in Chennai city, using purposive sampling. Data were collected through a structured interview schedule, with respondents contacted via home visits. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to gather detailed information on their socio-economic conditions, workplace experiences, and the various forms of violence they faced. The collected data were coded, tabulated, and analysed using percentages, diagrams, and tables to facilitate interpretation and present the findings effectively.

The study revealed that women in the unorganised sector experience diverse and severe forms of workplace violence, often intersecting with economic exploitation and gender discrimination. The key forms include:

- **Low and Unequal Wages:** Women reported being paid significantly less than men for similar work, with wages often below statutory minimum rates.
- **Harmful Working Conditions:** Many worked in unsafe environments exposed to dust, chemicals, extreme heat, or heavy machinery without protective gear.
- **Long Working Hours without Rest:** Workers often exceeded legal working hours, with no provision for breaks or overtime pay.
- **No Access to Basic Sanitation Facilities:** A lack of toilets and clean drinking water forced women to endure unhygienic and unhealthy working conditions.
- **Sexual Harassment (Including Demands for Sexual Favours):** Several respondents faced unwanted advances, inappropriate touching, or demands for sexual favours from supervisors or employers.
- **Rape and Transactional Sex:** A few reported extreme sexual violence or being coerced into sexual acts in exchange for employment or financial benefits.
- **Verbal Abuse:** Use of foul language, humiliation, and constant scolding created a hostile work atmosphere.
- **Physical Abuse And Excessive Workload:** Some experienced hitting, pushing, or being assigned work far beyond their physical capacity as a form of punishment or control.
- **Sexual Coercion For Job Security Or Contract Renewal:** Threats of termination or non-renewal of contracts were used to pressure women into sexual compliance.
- **Unsafe And Prolonged Travel To Work Sites:** The need to travel long distances, often at night or through unsafe areas, exposed women to harassment and assault en route.

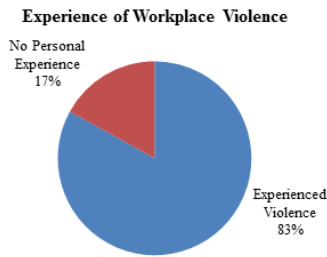
Awareness of Workplace Violence



**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

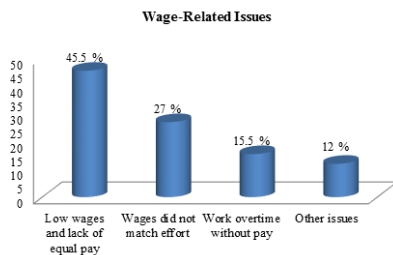
**Diagram - 1**

The diagram showing respondents' awareness of different forms of workplace violence, clearly reflecting that while wage discrimination was widely recognised, awareness of other forms remained relatively low.



**Diagram - 2**

The pie chart shows that 83% of respondents had directly experienced workplace violence including sexual harassment, verbal and physical abuse, wage discrimination, and exploitation while 17% had not faced it personally but knew of peers who had. This pattern reveals that workplace violence is widespread in the unorganised sector, with nearly all respondents being directly or indirectly affected, underscoring the urgent need for legal safeguards, strict enforcement, and victim support systems.



**Diagram-3**

The data shows that low wages and lack of equal pay are the most pressing wage-related problems, affecting 45.5% of respondents. About 27% felt their wages were not proportional to the effort they put in, reflecting significant dissatisfaction with pay structures. 15.5% reported being forced to work overtime without any additional compensation, indicating clear violations of labour rights. Meanwhile, 12% of respondents were other wage-related issues. These findings reveal systemic wage exploitation in the unorganised sector, highlighting the urgent need for wage standardisation, enforcement of equal pay, and stronger labour protections.

**CONCLUSION**

The present study reveals that gender-based violence (GBV) and workplace exploitation are not isolated incidents but deeply entrenched realities for women employed in Chennai's unorganised sector. While a significant proportion of respondents displayed awareness of different forms of workplace violence, including wage discrimination, sexual harassment, verbal abuse, and unsafe working conditions, this awareness has not translated into effective prevention or reporting. Socio-economic dependence on their jobs, coupled with fear of losing employment, social stigma, and the absence of strong institutional support systems, has resulted in underreporting and silent endurance of abuse. The persistence of wage-related inequalities, exploitative working hours, and unsafe environments reflects the urgent need to address these systemic issues through targeted policies and strict enforcement.

The findings call for a multi-pronged approach to combating workplace violence against women in the unorganised sector.

Strengthening the implementation of workplace harassment laws, particularly the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, is essential. Establishing local grievance redressal committees, providing legal aid and counselling services, and ensuring safe, confidential mechanisms for reporting can empower women to speak out without fear. Gender sensitisation programmes for both employers and employees, along with the promotion of women's unionisation and the formation of community-based support networks, can foster collective resistance to exploitation. Such measures, if implemented effectively, have the potential to transform workplace culture, enhance women's safety and dignity, and promote equitable participation in the workforce.

**Recommendations**

- **Policy Extension:** Amend labour laws to explicitly cover unorganised sector workers under workplace safety and harassment prevention measures.
- **Community-Based Monitoring:** Involve NGOs and self-help groups in monitoring and supporting affected women.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Educate women about their rights and available legal protections.
- **Workplace Inspections:** Conduct regular inspections to identify unsafe or exploitative work environments.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Offer skill development programs to reduce dependency on abusive employers.

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