



WOMEN'S CONDITION IN UNORGANIZED SECTOR: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Ayushi Bhargava
Research Scholar,
Bundelkhand University, Jhansi.

ABSTRACT

Condition of women in India is not better in spite of making up half of the population. During ancient period, they faced subordination and many other hardships. However, in 20th century their condition began to improve. The constitution has empowered them by removing unfair laws and promoting equality within democratic framework. They are now free to work outside and thus contributing in Indian economy by working in both the organized and unorganized sector. Their majority is engaged in the unorganized sector for their survival. The unorganized sector is a major source of employment in developing countries like India. Surveys done by scholars show that work participation of women in this sector is high. The working conditions of most of the organizations are often poor where women are facing many problems such as insecurity, discrimination etc. On this background, the micro level study discusses the key challenges faced by women workers in workplace. It also analyses the constitutional provisions and policies implemented to raise the conditions of women working in unorganized sectors further giving valuable suggestions to improve their condition.



KEYWORDS: *Unorganized Sector, Women, Challenges, Insecurity, Condition.*

INTRODUCTION

The adverse situation of working women in unorganized sector is a key issue over world-wide. Many studies reveal that in past time, due to patriarchal mind set, majority of women had to face various atrocities in family and society. After independence, the Constitution and national leaders took steps to remove unfair laws and promote gender equality within a democratic framework. They are free to work outside and play a vital role both at home as well as at work place. As a worker, they often carry the double burden of household responsibilities and professional work, which brings several challenges further. Although their contributions to society and the economy are significant, much of their work, especially in informal sectors remains unpaid and unrecognized.

The unorganized sector, often referred to as the informal economy represents a vast and dynamic segment of the labor force in developing countries, including India. The term *unorganized sector* was first introduced by Keith Hart in 1971, who described it as that segment of the urban labor force which operates outside the boundaries of the formal or organized labor market. This sector serves as a major source of employment in India, especially for women. In fact, their representation in this sector is higher than that of men. Large number of women from both rural and urban areas rely on informal jobs for their livelihoods. Despite this, the high level of participation reflects not only a lack of better employment opportunities but also socio-economic pressures that push women into informal

work. This sector is typically characterized by low entry barriers, lack of formal employment contracts, absence of social security and minimal regulatory oversight. A significant proportion of women, particularly from economically and socially marginalized communities find employment in this sector due to limited access to education, skill development and formal job opportunities. Their participation spans various informal occupations such as domestic work, agriculture, construction, home-based production, street vending and small-scale services. As a result, while the unorganized sector offers income opportunities, it also exposes women to various risks and insecurities that require urgent policy attention.

The *Code on Social Security, 2020*, defines the terms such as “social security,” “unorganized sector” and “unorganized worker”. According to the Code, **social security** refers to the protective measures extended to employees, unorganized workers, gig workers and platform workers to ensure access to healthcare and to provide income support. This support is particularly vital in circumstances such as old age, unemployment, illness, disability, workplace injuries, maternity, or the death of a primary earner. These protections are offered through legal entitlements and government-initiated schemes under the Code. The code defines **unorganized sector** as any business owned by individuals or self-employed persons that engages in the production or sale of goods, or in providing services of any kind. An **unorganized worker** includes home-based workers, self-employed individuals, or wage workers employed within the unorganized sector. It also covers workers in the organized sector who are not protected under the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 or under Chapters III to VII of the Code. Understanding the specific challenges faced by women in the unorganized sector is crucial for developing effective and inclusive labor policies. Addressing these issues requires a multidimensional approach that includes legal recognition, social protection, capacity building and gender-sensitive policy interventions to ensure that women’s contributions are acknowledged, supported and fairly compensated.

On this background, this study is primarily based on secondary sources to find out the conditions of working women in unorganized sector and challenges faced by them.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

The review of literature examines existing studies, reports, and secondary data on women working in the unorganized sector. It highlights key issues such as low wages, lack of social security, job insecurity, and gender discrimination. By analysing previous research, this section identifies research gaps and provides a conceptual foundation for the present study.

A study, “*Women Workers in Unorganized Sector in India: Problems and Prospects*”, by Hajra Masood and Qaiser Jahan (2015) highlights that the poor condition of women in the unorganised sector stems from discrimination in the labour market, weak collective organisation, limited training opportunities, and the negative impact of technological change. Inadequate laws and weak enforcement further worsen their working conditions. Therefore, stronger government efforts are needed to ensure occupational safety, fair wages, reasonable working hours, and dignified work for women in the unorganised sector. Dr. Madhu Sudan Dash (2015), in “*Condition of Women Working in the Unorganized Sector*,” notes that technological change has shifted the economy toward a market-driven model, often disadvantaging women. New technology in their workplaces frequently leads to men replacing them. Many women continue to face low wages, lack of social security, workplace harassment, and limited career growth opportunities.

Manju (2017), in “*Women in Unorganized Sector – Problems & Issues in India*,” finds that the unorganized sector is larger in rural areas and employs more women than men. Women workers face job insecurity, low and unequal wages, lack of social security, and irregular work due to seasonal and temporary jobs with no clear employer-employee relationship. Poor management worsens these problems, highlighting the need for education and awareness to improve their situation. In another research, “*Women in Unorganized Sector – Problems & Issues in India*,” Namita Das (2018) notes that the unorganized sector is larger in rural areas and employs more women than men. Women workers face job insecurity, unequal wages, lack of social security, and irregular work due to seasonal, unstable jobs and weak formal structures. She stresses that education and self-awareness are essential for improving

their conditions. Prof. Gururaj S. Barki (2020), in *"Issues and Challenges Faced by Women in the Unorganized Sector,"* emphasizes that real development requires gender equality and recognition of the daily challenges women face. Since most employment in India is in the unorganized sector, women continue to struggle despite policy efforts to support them. Dr. Rajashekhar C. Koppad (2020) in an article, *"Problems Faced by the Women in Unorganized Sector: Issues and Challenges,"* concludes that India's rich cultural diversity reflects respect for women, yet true national development depends on achieving gender equality in education, opportunities, and everyday life. Although most employment is generated in the unorganised and self-employed sectors, women working in these areas continue to face many challenges despite policy efforts aimed at their empowerment.

Anjanaben Jayantilal Solanki (2022), in *"Status of Women Labourers in Unorganised Sectors and Their Problems,"* finds that women workers still bear dual responsibilities at home and work, and their overall condition remains poor. They face gender inequality, low education, discrimination, harassment, low wages, long hours, and heavy workload, all of which worsened during COVID-19. Although laws and welfare schemes exist, women still do not enjoy equal rights due to persistent inequalities in the unorganized sector. According to the Ministry of Labour and Employment (2022), 56.5% of women workers in the non-agricultural sector are employed in informal enterprises. To support women's employment, the government has extended maternity leave, mandated crèche facilities, allowed night shifts with safety measures, and opened certain mining roles to women. The Code on Wages, 2019 ensures equal pay, while vocational training programs aim to improve women's employability.

Dr. Vanita Namdeo Kamble (2023) finds that working women face constant physical and emotional stress from balancing work and household duties. In the unorganized sector, they are exposed to serious safety and health risks. The study stresses that improving their working conditions requires coordinated efforts from the government, employers, labor groups, and society, as women's occupational health is crucial for overall social well-being. Shubh Ashish Singh and Ayushi Kumari find that women in the unorganized sector face major challenges due to weak legal protection, social discrimination, and economic hardship. They experience low job opportunities, unequal pay, lack of maternity benefits, and harassment, worsened by poor law enforcement and gender bias. The study calls for stronger legal safeguards, better awareness, skill training, and coordinated efforts from the government, employers, and society to ensure safer and fairer working conditions for women.

The study, *"The Plight and Problems of Women Workers in Unorganized Sector with Focus on Coimbatore,"* by Dr. S. Jayachitra (2025) highlights the difficult conditions faced by women workers in the unorganised sector, with a specific focus on Coimbatore, which plays an important role in providing employment opportunities for them. A significant proportion of women workers are employed in hotel-related jobs, where many report experiences of sexual harassment at the workplace. Job insecurity remains one of their major concerns. The findings emphasize the urgent need to improve working conditions and strengthen social security measures to enhance the overall quality of life of women in the unorganised sector.

CATEGORIES OF WOMEN WORKERS IN UNORGANIZED SECTOR

Women workers in the unorganized sector are categorized based on the nature of work, employment status, and sectoral divisions. Below is the table showing the contribution of women in different categories of the unorganized sector.

Category of Work	Nature Of Work
Domestic Workers	Work in private households. Face exploitation and harassment. May be full-time, part-time or live- in workers.
Agricultural Workers	Work on land owned by others. Seasonal in nature, often unpaid or underpaid.
Street Vendors	Informal work, includes mobility and high degree of self reliance. Operates primarily in public spaces without permanent structure.
Home-Based Workers	Produce goods or services in or near their homes for local, domestic or global markets. Engaged in both traditional, manual tasks and modern, skilled activities.
Unskilled Labor (Construction, etc.)	Engaged in physically demanding tasks that require minimal formal training. Work is often temporary, manual and needing supervision.

WOMEN'S CONDITION IN UNORGANIZED SECTOR

Social aspect of the paper highlights that, discriminatory societal norms and patriarchal attitudes have hindered women's ability to advance in the workforce and have made them more vulnerable in the unorganized sector. Also, limited education and skill development opportunities pushed women into low-paying, unorganized jobs, deepening their economic disadvantage. Historically, weak enforcement of labor laws for women in the unorganized sector has left them vulnerable to exploitation, poor conditions, and low wages. Lastly, women in the unorganized sector often face social stigma and discrimination, making it difficult for them to assert their rights or report poor working conditions.

Economically, women, especially from marginalized communities, have historically faced greater economic inequality due to limited resources, poor access to education and discrimination. Poverty and lack of job options often push them into the unorganized sector. Gender-based job segregation in the unorganized sector keeps women at a disadvantage, concentrating them in low-paid, insecure work like domestic labor, agriculture, and garment production due to traditional roles and biases. Further, the lack of formal contracts, social security and legal protections makes women in the unorganized sector more vulnerable to exploitation, unequal pay and unsafe working conditions. They often struggle to start or sustain their own businesses due to limited economic independence, lack of collateral, and biased lending practices. Without access to resources or formal financial services, many are confined to low-paying, risky jobs in the unorganized sector. Wage discrimination keeps women earning less than men for similar work, deepening economic inequality and limiting their ability to improve their lives. Historically, women have had limited access to quality education and skill training, restricting their ability to pursue better job opportunities.

From the cultural point of view, Societal taboos and stereotypes around women's work often lead to discrimination in hiring and promotions. Cultural norms and safety concerns often limit women's access to jobs beyond their local area, reducing opportunities and increasing the risk of exploitation and harassment. Additionally, patriarchal family norms limit women's freedom to make their own employment decisions, often pressuring them into undesirable jobs or poor working conditions. Limited awareness of women's workplace rights and prevailing cultural norms have hindered gender equality. These issues are worsened by the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles within the unorganized sector.

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN UNORGANIZED SECTOR

1.Inferior/Subordinate Status- Women in the unorganized sector often hold subordinate roles compared to men, with lower wages, insecure jobs, and limited legal protection. Their weak socio-

economic status forces them to prioritize family needs over their own, often lacking access to nutritious food, healthcare, clothing, and education for their children. This makes them one of the most vulnerable groups in society, highlighting persistent gender inequality.

2. Lack of Education- Women workers in the unorganized sector often have low levels of education and limited access to skill development. As a result, they lack the technical knowledge and training required for their tasks, which affects their productivity and keeps them confined to low-paying, menial jobs. This educational gap also restricts their ability to seek better opportunities or demand fair wages and rights at the workplace.

3. Inequalities and Discrimination- In the unorganized sector, there is a clear disparity in work participation between men and women. Women often face discrimination in hiring, wages, and work responsibilities. They are typically assigned lower-paying, less secure jobs and are excluded from decision-making roles. Gender biases and traditional norms further reinforce these inequalities, limiting women's opportunities for growth and fair treatment at the workplace.

4. Exploitation and Harassment- Women in the unorganized sector often face low pay, long working hours, and unsafe conditions. Many also suffer from verbal or physical harassment, but fear of losing their jobs or being judged stops them from speaking up.

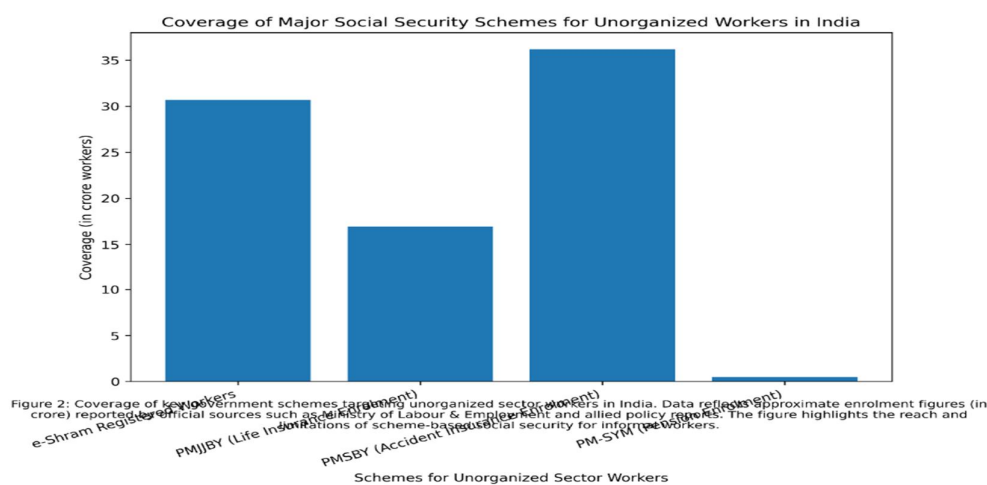
5. Job Insecurity- In the unorganized sector, there are no strong laws to protect workers. As a result, women often face unstable jobs, with no guarantee of regular work, fixed wages, or job benefits. They can be removed from work at any time without any reason or support.

6. Irregular Wages- In the unorganized sector, workers often don't get their wages on time because there is no proper system to ensure timely payment. For women, the situation is even worse, as they may be paid less than men for the same work or have to wait longer to receive their earnings. This makes it hard for them to manage daily expenses and support their families.

7. Work Pressure- Women in the unorganized sector face high work pressure. They often work longer hours than men, doing both job-related tasks and household chores. This leads to tiredness, stress, and very little time for rest or personal care.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND LEGISLATIONS

The key government schemes targeting unorganized sector workers in India such as Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY), Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY) and Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan (PM-SYM) are shown in the figure below with their coverage. The data is reported by official sources such as Ministry of Labour & Employment and allied policy reports. The figure highlights the reach and limitations of schemes based on social security for informal workers.



The figure shows approximate enrolment under major government initiatives for extending social security to unorganized workers. The e-Shram portal has achieved wide outreach, with about

30.68 crore workers registered by 2024, reflecting growing awareness and coverage. PMJJBY and PMSBY, which provide low-cost life and accident insurance, show relatively higher enrolment during 2023-24, indicating the preference for short-term risk protection among unorganized workers. In contrast, PM-SYM, a contributory pension scheme for old-age security, records comparatively lower enrolment, suggesting limited awareness, affordability issues, and weaker long-term participation. Overall, while registration and insurance coverage have expanded, ensuring sustainable pension security for unorganized workers remains a key policy concern.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Women working in the unorganized sector, especially in rural areas, face many challenges like low wages, job insecurity, lack of healthcare, and poor working conditions. Their work is often irregular and unprotected, with little support from employers or the system. These problems affect not just their income but also their physical and emotional health. Since women play a key role in both their families and the economy, it is important to improve their working conditions. This requires combined efforts from the government, employers and society. Ensuring their health and safety at work is essential for the well-being of both women and the nation. Although many laws and legislations have been formulated to improve their lot, but still their condition is not that much better.

To improve the condition of women workers, there are some suggestions, firstly, women workers should be skillfully trained and offered digital education so that they can empower and upgrade themselves. There is a need to create awareness about the institutional support available to them to protect their rights and provide free legal aid in case of harassment or wage denial. Secondly, a separate women grievance cell headed by a woman should be established in every organization sector and in case of unorganized sector women to form self-help groups for their protection. Access to health insurance, maternity benefits and pension schemes should be provided to them and their inclusion in schemes like ESI, PF and Ayushman Bharat is also suggested. Then, proper regulation of unorganized sector with strict enforcement of labor laws and registration of unorganized workers, especially women, under welfare boards highly suggested. Lastly, suggestion to conduct awareness drives for employers and male coworkers to create respectful workplaces and use of mass media to communicate the social message relating to women equality is indicated in the paper.

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