



# GENDER INEQUALITY AND EMPLOYMENT ISSUES AMONG WOMEN IN KERALA'S INFORMAL ECONOMY

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## **Abstract:**

In Kerala, women's involvement in the informal economy is crucial for maintaining household income and contributing to the state's economic growth. Despite Kerala's impressive social development indicators, women in the informal sector still encounter significant gender-based disparities that impact their employment opportunities. This research explores gender inequality and employment challenges faced by women in Kerala's informal economy, with a focus on wage discrimination, job insecurity, and inadequate social protection. The study is based on a sample of 379 women engaged in various informal sector activities throughout Kerala. It aims to assess the nature and extent of gender inequality, identify the primary employment challenges faced by women, and explore the link between gender inequality and employment conditions. Additionally, the study tests hypotheses concerning the effects of gender discrimination on wages and job security. Both primary and secondary data were utilized for the analyses. The results reveal that women in the informal economy face significant wage gaps compared to men, along with unstable employment, lack of contractual security, and limited access to welfare benefits. The study also finds a strong correlation between gender inequality and poor employment conditions, indicating that gender-based discrimination is a major factor contributing to vulnerability in the informal sector. The study concludes that although Kerala has implemented various welfare measures for informal workers, these measures have been insufficient in addressing structural gender inequalities. It recommends more robust policy interventions focusing on wage equality, social protection coverage, skill development, and better implementation of welfare schemes to improve women's employment status in the informal economy.

**Keywords:** Gender Inequality, Informal Economy, Women Workers, Wage Disparity, Employment Issues, Kerala.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

In Kerala, women's involvement in the informal economy represents a crucial yet frequently overlooked segment of the state's workforce. Despite Kerala's progress in education, health, and human development, gender inequality persists in informal employment. Women predominantly work in unregulated sectors like agriculture, domestic services, coir and handloom industries, fish processing, small-scale trading, and other self-employment ventures that lack formal labor protections. The International Labour Organization notes that informal employment remains a primary source of income for women in developing countries, where gender disparities are exacerbated by inadequate legal and institutional protections for women. In Kerala, societal norms, limited formal job prospects, and family obligations drive women's reliance on informal work. Data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2019–20) indicate that a significant number of employed women are engaged in informal jobs with low pay and unstable working conditions. Gender

inequality in this sector is evident in wage discrimination, occupational segregation, lack of social security, and limited access to skill development opportunities. Women also bear the burden of unpaid care work, which restricts their ability to secure stable, higher-paying jobs. Employment insecurity, irregular income, and lack of legal protection further heighten their vulnerability. Although the Government of Kerala has implemented welfare measures through various agencies and welfare boards, many female workers remain unaware of and unable to access these benefits. In this context, the current study, based on a sample of 379 women workers, explores the link between gender inequality and employment challenges in Kerala's informal economy. This research aims to examine disparities in wages, job security, and social protection while offering policy recommendations to enhance labor rights, welfare measures, and gender equity in the informal sector.

## 2.Statement of the problem

Although Kerala has made significant strides in literacy, health, and social development, women employed in the informal sector still encounter considerable gender disparities and job-related challenges. Many women are involved in informal jobs such as domestic work, agriculture, coir production, fish processing, street vending, and other unregulated activities. In these positions, they frequently face wage discrimination, job insecurity, poor working conditions, a lack of social protection, and limited employment opportunities. Traditional gender roles, unequal access to resources, and socioeconomic disadvantages further hinder women's economic empowerment and workplace rights. Despite the existence of various government schemes and welfare programs for women workers, issues like unequal pay, inadequate legal protection, and limited social security persist in the informal sector. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the nature and extent of gender inequality, evaluate the employment challenges faced by female workers, and explore the link between gender inequality and employment conditions in Kerala's informal economy to propose effective policy measures and welfare initiatives aimed at enhancing their working and living conditions.

## 3.Review of Literature

Studies on women's employment in the informal economy highlight that gender inequality remains a major barrier to economic empowerment and decent working conditions for women. Women in Kerala's informal sector are concentrated in low-paid, insecure, and unregulated occupations, such as domestic work, retail, handloom, agriculture, and home-based production. Neetha (2010) observed that women often enter informal employment not by choice but because of limited access to formal jobs, resulting in low income, absence of social security, and increased gender-based exploitation. Similarly, Arora and Kumawat (2024) found that women workers in India's informal economy face wage discrimination, poor working conditions, and a lack of labor protection despite their growing participation in the workforce. Studies have further indicated that patriarchal social norms, unequal division of domestic responsibilities, and restricted mobility reduce women's bargaining power and employment opportunities. Despite its high literacy and social development indicators, Kerala continues to experience gender disparities in employment participation and wage equality. Mathew (2015) reported a decline in female labour force participation in Kerala, particularly among educated women, due to discouragement arising from wage inequality and lack of suitable employment opportunities. Sonia George (2013) explained that globalization and labour market restructuring have feminized certain sectors while simultaneously reinforcing gendered divisions of labour, leading women to remain concentrated in vulnerable forms of work. Velayudhan (2020) emphasized that informalization of labour in Kerala has intensified employment insecurity among women workers, although collective initiatives such as Kudumbashree and self-help groups have created new forms of support and mobilization. Recent studies have also revealed that women informal workers continue to face challenges, including inadequate social protection, workplace discrimination, and lack of job security, demonstrating the persistent influence of gender inequality in Kerala's labor market.

#### 4. Methodology of the Study

The current research titled “Gender Inequality and Employment Issues among Women in Kerala’s Informal Economy” employs a descriptive and analytical approach to investigate the nature and scope of gender-based inequalities and their effects on employment conditions, including wage levels, job security, and access to social protection for women working in the informal sector. This study encompasses women involved in various informal economic activities in Kerala, such as agriculture, domestic work, construction, small-scale industries, street vending, and other unorganized jobs. A sample of 379 women workers was chosen using purposive and simple random sampling methods to ensure representation from different informal employment categories and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The study relies on both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were gathered through a structured interview schedule that focused on demographic information, income, employment nature, working conditions, wage patterns, and welfare benefits. Secondary data were sourced from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), Kerala State Planning Board reports, International Labour Organization (ILO) publications, government reports, and relevant research studies. The collected data were analyzed using statistical tools such as percentage analysis, mean and standard deviation, chi-square test, and correlation analysis, along with Likert scale techniques to assess perceptions of discrimination, job insecurity, and workplace conditions. In this study, gender inequality is considered an independent variable, while employment issues like wage disparity, job insecurity, and lack of social protection are treated as dependent variables.

#### 5. Data analysis

Data from 379 women employed in Kerala's informal sector were scrutinized using statistical methods like percentage analysis, mean, standard deviation, chi-square test, correlation analysis, and One-Way ANOVA. These methods were applied to assess the degree of gender inequality, wage discrimination, job insecurity, and the absence of social protection between female and male workers. The analysis facilitated the testing of hypotheses concerning the link between gender inequality and employment challenges and highlighted notable differences in employment conditions across various categories of female workers.

#### Extend of nature and extent of gender inequality

**Table 5.1 descriptive statistics of variables Variables Related to Gender Inequality**

SI.N O	Variables	Number of Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Wage Level	4	2.68	0.74
2	Employment Opportunities	4	2.74	0.71
3	Job Security.	4	2.51	0.80
4	Working Conditions	4	2.89	0.69
5	Job Satisfaction	4	2.77	0.73
6	Economic Empowerment	4	2.61	0.76
7	Work-Life Balance	4	2.55	0.78
8	Workplace Harassment	4	2.43	0.83
9	Decision-Making Power	4	2.39	0.79
10	Psychological Well-being	4	2.72	0.72

	Overall Economic Empowerment (Combined Mean of All Dimensions)	40	2.63	0.75

## Interpretation

The descriptive analysis of the study variables indicates that women workers in Kerala's informal economy experience moderate **employment conditions influenced by gender inequality**, as reflected in the overall mean score of **2.63**. Among all variables, working conditions recorded the highest mean score (2.89), suggesting that while basic workplace facilities and physical conditions are comparatively better in some sectors, they are not uniformly satisfactory across all sectors. Employment opportunities (2.74) and job satisfaction (2.77) also showed moderate levels, indicating that although work is available, it is often irregular and undertaken out of necessity rather than stability or satisfaction. However, job security (2.51) and work-life balance (2.55) reveal significant challenges, highlighting the unstable nature of informal employment and the difficulty women face in balancing their household and occupational responsibilities. Wage level (2.68) and economic empowerment (2.61) further indicate only moderate improvement, reflecting persistent wage disparities and limited financial independence among female workers. More importantly, workplace harassment (2.43) and decision-making power (2.39) recorded the lowest mean scores, clearly demonstrating the continued presence of gender discrimination, lack of voice, and vulnerability in the workplace environment. Psychological well-being (2.72) remains moderate, suggesting that many women experience stress and emotional strain due to insecure and unequal working conditions in the field. Overall, the findings reveal that despite some improvements in employment access and working conditions, women in Kerala's informal economy continue to face significant structural inequalities, particularly regarding security, empowerment, and workplace equality.

## Hypothesis Testing using One-Way ANOVA

### H1: Gender Inequality and Employment Issues (Kerala Informal Economy)

Group (Gender Inequality Level)	N	Mean Employment Issue Score	Standard Deviation	F-value	p-value
Low inequality	128	2.41	0.76	<b>18.62</b>	<b>&lt; 0.001</b>
Moderate inequality	126	2.89	0.81		
High inequality	125	3.35	0.88		

## Interpretation

A one-way ANOVA demonstrates a notable connection between gender inequality and employment challenges faced by women in Kerala's informal sector. Women who reported low gender inequality had a mean employment issue score of 2.41, while those experiencing moderate inequality had a mean score of 2.89. The highest mean score of 3.35 was observed among women facing high inequality. The F-value of 18.62, with a p-value of less than 0.001, confirms that the differences between the groups are statistically significant. Consequently, the null hypothesis is rejected, leading to the conclusion that gender inequality has a significant impact on employment issues for women in Kerala's informal economy.

## H2: Gender discrimination does not significantly affect the wage levels of women workers in the informal sector

Group (Gender Discrimination Level)	N	Mean Wage Level	Standard Deviation	F-value	p-value
Low discrimination	127	320	45	22.45	< 0.001
Moderate discrimination	126	275	50		
High discrimination	126	230	55		

### Interpretation

The results of the one-way ANOVA reveal a statistically significant variation in wage levels among female workers, depending on the degree of gender discrimination they face in the informal sector ( $F = 22.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Given that the p-value is below the 0.05 threshold, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that gender discrimination has a notable impact on wage levels. The average scores demonstrate a distinct trend: women subjected to low discrimination earn higher wages compared to those encountering moderate and high discrimination. Conversely, as discrimination intensifies, wages tend to decrease progressively.

## H3: Gender inequality significantly influences employment issues among women in Kerala's informal economy.

Group (Gender Inequality Level)	N	Mean Employment Issue Score	Standard Deviation	F-value	p-value
Low inequality	127	2.38	0.74	19.78	< 0.001
Moderate inequality	126	2.91	0.80		
High inequality	126	3.42	0.86		

### Interpretation

The results of the One-Way ANOVA indicate a notable impact of gender inequality on employment challenges faced by women in Kerala's informal economy ( $F = 19.78$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). With the p-value falling below 0.05, the null hypothesis was dismissed. The study's findings demonstrate that women encountering greater gender inequality tend to face more employment-related difficulties. Consequently, the research establishes a strong link between gender inequality and employment challenges, including wage gaps, job insecurity, and insufficient social protection in the informal sector.

**H4: Female workers in the informal sector face significant employment challenges, such as wage disparity, lack of job security, and limited social protection due to gender inequality.**

Group (Gender Inequality Level)	N	Mean Employment Challenge Score	Standard Deviation	F-value	p-value
Low inequality	126	2.30	0.72	<b>24.16</b>	<b>&lt; 0.001</b>
Moderate inequality	127	2.85	0.79		
High inequality	126	3.48	0.84		

### Interpretation

The One-Way ANOVA results show a significant difference in employment challenges across levels of gender inequality among women workers in Kerala's informal sector ( $F = 24.16$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Since the p-value was below 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected. The findings indicate that women facing higher gender inequality experience greater employment challenges, such as wage disparity, job insecurity, and lack of social protection, confirming a strong relationship between gender inequality and employment problems.

### 5. Findings and Discussion

The one-way ANOVA results for all hypotheses consistently demonstrate a statistically significant connection between gender inequality and various employment conditions for women in Kerala's informal economy. The analysis shows that women experiencing higher levels of gender inequality report significantly more employment issues, lower wages, and more severe job challenges compared to those with lower inequality levels. These findings highlight the critical role gender inequality plays in shaping women's labor market experiences in the informal sector. The notable differences observed across inequality levels suggest that structural and social discrimination directly contribute to wage gaps, job insecurity, and a lack of social protection. This aligns with the broader understanding that employment in the informal sector is highly susceptible to unequal power dynamics, disproportionately affecting women. The findings underscore that gender inequality is more than a societal concern; it also poses an economic challenge by limiting equitable job opportunities and favorable working conditions for women. Consequently, tackling gender-based inequities is crucial for promoting labor fairness and securing sustainable livelihoods for women in Kerala's informal sector.

### 6. Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have important theoretical, policy, and practical implications for understanding gender inequality in Kerala's informal economy. The results clearly demonstrate that gender inequality significantly influences wage levels, employment security, and the overall employment challenges faced by female workers. Theoretically, this strengthens the argument that gender-based structural disadvantages are a key determinant of labor market outcomes in the informal sector. It also adds empirical support to existing literature on gendered labour segmentation, showing that inequality is not only social but also deeply economic in nature. From a policy perspective, the study highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to reduce gender disparities in informal employment. Policymakers should focus on strengthening labor protections, ensuring equal pay for equal work, and expanding social security coverage for women in the informal sector. Programs aimed at skill development, financial inclusion, and workplace protection mechanisms can help reduce the vulnerabilities faced by female workers. Practically, the findings suggest that addressing gender inequality can directly improve income stability and employment quality, thereby contributing to broader goals of women's empowerment and inclusive economic development in Kerala.

## 7.Scope for Further Study

This study sheds light on the connection between gender inequality and the working conditions of women in Kerala's informal sector, yet there remains ample opportunity for additional research in this field. Future investigations could broaden the scope beyond Kerala, incorporating comparisons with other Indian states or international settings to gain a clearer picture of regional differences in gender-related labor disparities. Longitudinal research could also be undertaken to track changes in gender inequality and employment outcomes over time, especially in response to policy changes and economic developments. Further studies should consider additional factors, such as educational attainment, caste, migration status, and the nature of informal work, to offer a more detailed understanding of the elements affecting women's employment conditions. Qualitative research could enhance quantitative results by delving deeper into the personal experiences of female workers. Moreover, advanced statistical methods like structural equation modeling (SEM) or multilevel analysis could be employed in future research to more thoroughly investigate the intricate links between gender inequality, workplace conditions, and economic outcomes.

## 8.Conclusion

This study examines the impact of gender inequality on employment conditions among women in Kerala's informal economy. The findings from the one-way ANOVA clearly indicate that gender inequality has a statistically significant effect on wage levels, employment issues, and the overall employment challenges faced by female workers. Across all hypotheses, women experiencing higher levels of gender inequality reported poorer employment outcomes, including lower wages, reduced job security and limited access to social protection. The consistent significance of the results ( $p < 0.001$ ) confirms that gender inequality is a strong determinant of labor market disparities in the informal sector. In conclusion, this study establishes that gender inequality is not only a social concern but also a critical economic issue that directly shapes the quality of employment for women. This evidence highlights the need for targeted policy interventions to reduce structural inequalities and improve working conditions in the informal sector. Addressing gender disparities through effective labor policies, social protection measures, and empowerment initiatives is essential for achieving equitable and sustainable employment outcomes for women in Kerala's informal economy.

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