

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON GENDER-SPECIFIC
VULNERABILITIES AMONG INFORMAL WORKERS IN URBAN
AREAS OF WEST BENGAL**

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Subject: Geography

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ABSTRACT

The present study gives the comparative analysis by clubbing together gender-specific vulnerabilities of informal workers residing in urban regions of West Bengal with references to Midnapore Municipal Area. Based on 300 respondents of all professions like domestic work, construction and street vending, the study shows there are distinct differences in male and female workforce in regard to their educational records, job status and enjoyment of welfare programs. Women were also discovered to be more clustered in medium security jobs that pay low wages such as domestic help and showed a significantly low awareness and access of schemes like the E-Shram card and PM-SYM. These patterns manifest in structural inequalities that are based on occupational segregation by gender and systematic lock out of social security. The results highlight the necessity of gender-sensitive policies that should be used to improve education, skills training, inclusion in welfare systems, and safety of urban life of the female informal workers, thereby leading to more gender-equal labor markets in cities.

Keywords: Informal Sector, Gender Disparity, Urban Livelihoods, Social Security, Occupational Segregation, West Bengal.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the urban economy of India, the informal sector plays the key role of generating employment among the millions of people who are not covered by the terms and safeguards of the formal employment ordinances. In the cities of West Bengal, which include Midnapore, Kolkata and Howrah, the informal jobs are found on a variety of sectors comprising building works, domestic works, street selling and garbage scavenging. The informal industry has all the characteristics of low wages, erratic employment, lack of social security, and no legal

protection as a sector despite its economic relevance. The challenges are further worsened by those associated with socio-economic inequalities and especially gender-based ones.

The issue of gender is central to determining the weaknesses that one goes through in the informal economy. Women informal laborers are doubly disadvantaged not only do they have to deal with the precarity of informal labor but also have to tackle gender issues through wage-discrimination, job segregation, mobility and the lack of welfare programs. They usually experience invisibility, underrepresentation, and increased levels of harassment and exploitation. This research aims to look comparatively at the precarious situations of male and female informal workers and the city of West Bengal in terms of income inequality, workplace hazards, benefit access, and the general structural factors that foster gender-based labor injustices in informality.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Agarwal (2021) Analysed the highly gendered impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on livelihoods in India particularly women working in the informal sector. Through the study, it was established that women bore the disproportionate brunt as they lost their jobs, suffered heightened household demands, defaulted on food access, and were left out in the use of digital and financial services. Also, they were socio-economically vulnerable owing to insufficient awareness and accessibility to the government welfare schemes. Agarwal emphasized that gender-responsive recovery measures are most essential and require special cash transfers, food security, employment programs that consider social-economic circumstances and care responsibilities of women.

Banerjee and Banerjee (2022) delved into the notion of a so-called just transition in regards to informal labor force workers working in the regions of coal production in India, as the state transitions towards renewable energy in a slow pace. Through their study, they pointed out the informal workers, who may not have the protection of the law and may not be on the books, faced a serious threat of being displaced and losing the earning capacity. The authors raised the issue of the participatory nature of policy frameworks that must involve informal workers in policy planning and implementation of transition strategies. They highlighted that these workers were going to be the retailers of energy policy changes devoid of sufficient social protection cushions, skills preparation, and livelihood and income options.

Guntupalli and Chakraborty (2018) considered the validity of the Active Ageing Index (AAI), a measure that was designed by the Europeans, to India. In their analysis, they found out that the AAI was actually a valuable framework in developed nations, but it was not showing the real world of elderly citizens of India especially those who worked in the informal sector of no-retirement safety net. The paper indicated that old age factors such as socio-economic insecurity, poor healthcare and gender inequity during old age hampered active ageing to a large extent, in India. The authors promoted the creation of a locally-loading ageing index, which takes into account informal job and unpaid care work, a familial relationship of dependence.

Kamala (2021) provided a thorough analysis of migration issues across South Asia and identifies key socio-political and economic drivers of internal and transboundary migration. The review has emphasized that migration is often the result of multiple factors that include the interplay of poverty, absence of livelihood, environmental stress and socio-political threats/disruption. Particularly, Kamala reflected critically on how policies in South Asia have not been able to counter the structural vulnerabilities of migrants, including migrants in the informal economy. The review has highlighted the lack of coherent regional frameworks for the protection of migrant rights, contributing to precarious living and working conditions for migrants, particularly in urban informal economies.

Kamala and Kamalakar (2022) elaborated on these issues and examined the challenges of migration in South Asia, highlighting the connectedness of migration, urbanization, and labor informality. They noted that migrants predominately end up in low-wage, insecure jobs in urban centers and have very limited access to health care, housing, and legal protections. They concluded that migration has a significant impact on urban labor markets and economic development, yet it is still systematic exclusion from access to welfare policy for migrants. They also argued for plans for more inclusive and migrant-sensitive urban policies that acknowledge the contributions made by migrant workers and that address their socio-economic vulnerabilities.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is based on a descriptive and comparative research design with the study done in the Midnapore Municipal Area of West Bengal, and a purposive sample of 300 informal sector workers were used to provide a description of the variable. The information to be used was

gathered through questionnaires, but questions were formatted in a manner, which allowed clear distinction between the concern analyzed through descriptive statistics and table representation of the data.

3.1. Research Design

The research design to be used in the study is descriptive and comparative to investigate gender-based inequalities among the employees in the informal sector in urban regions. This design helps to conduct a detailed analysis of demographic features, occupational trends, and welfare scheme access. It also enables a comparative study of male and female respondents to emphasize the inequalities of the system and social-economic weaknesses.

3.2. Sampling Area

The study was done in Midnapore Municipal Area in the district of Paschim Medinipur in West Bengal. This is an urban local representative area that has a wide span of informal sectors of employment and offers an indicative backdrop to study gender-related issues among the unorganized laborers.

3.3. Sample Size

The sample size consists of 300 respondents both girls and boys who are workers in a number of informal jobs like domestic work, construction, street selling and picking litter. The sample was composed in such a way that it was adequately representative with respect to age groups, level of education and category of occupation.

3.4. Data Collection Tools

The information is obtained using a structured questionnaire, with closed- and open-ended questions. Where asked about demographic details/ social/ occupation type, education level, and also awareness and/or access of Government provided welfare schemes you may have a e-shram card, PM-SYM or health insurance. Responses were collected face to face interviews, in the local language used. Responses were made clearer and limitations were avoided as far as miscommunication and misinterpretation.

3.5. Data Analysis

The data collected was arranged into tables and analyzed using techniques like distribution by percentage and comparison. The data was presented and analyzed visually using bar graphs and pie charts which followed CEWD gender breakdowns by demographic profiles, workplace

categories, and access to welfare. The analysis focused on identifying gaps, patterns, and implications for policy action on gender equity in the informal workforce.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The demographics of the respondents, sorted by age and literacy level and further categorized by gender, is shown in Table 1. Of the 300 respondents, the greatest percentage fall within the 31–45 age group (45%) followed by 18–30 (30.7%) and 46–60 (24.3%). Looking at gender distribution by age groups, the proportion of respondents is distributed evenly, with slightly more females than males being represented in the 18–30 age group and slightly more males than females in the older groups. Regarding literacy levels, 56.7% of respondents have completed secondary level education whereas 43.3% has only completed primary school education. Females had a higher consistence with primary education compared to males.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Category	Male	Female	Total (%)
Age Group (18–30)	40	52	30.7%
Age Group (31–45)	65	70	45%
Age Group (46–60)	45	28	24.3%
Literacy (Primary)	50	80	43.3%
Literacy (Secondary+)	100	70	56.7%

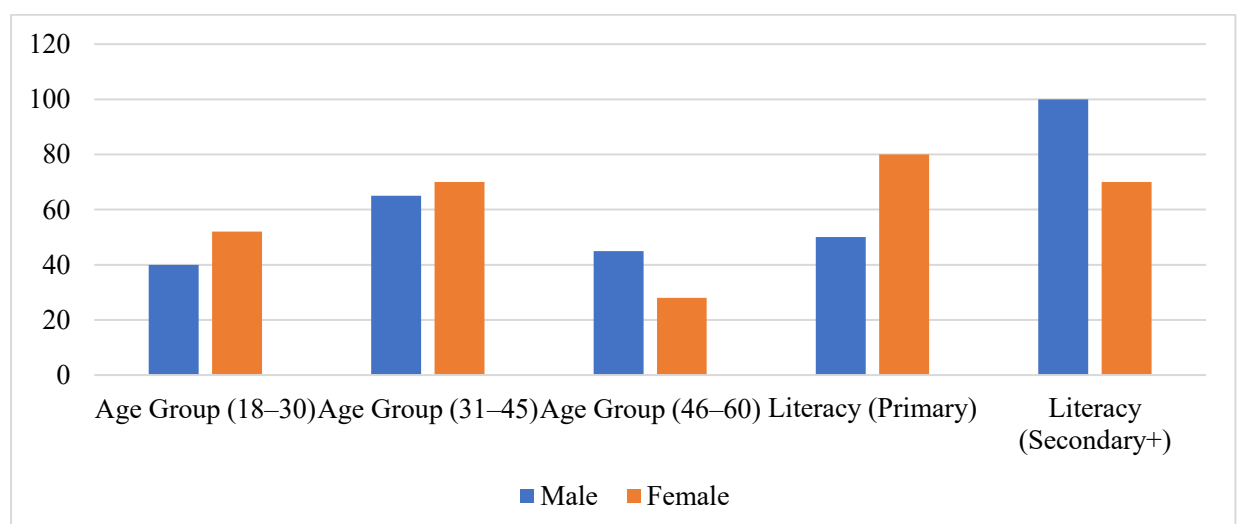


Figure 1: Graphical Representation of the Demographic Profile of Respondents

The data suggests that most respondents are in the peak of their working age (31–45 years), which could mean they are potentially part of the economically active workforce. The gender demographic does show a fairly balanced representation in the distribution by age group of respondents. The response to literacy suggests that there is evidence of educational attainment because over half of the respondents have high school or above. However, the larger number of females having primary education might reflect additional gender disparity in education, which may impact socio-economic outcome variables for this region.

Table 2 outlines the occupations of the respondents by gender across six employment categories. The majority of respondents are working in domestic help (28.3%) with the majority female (80). Next is construction employment at (21.6%) with mostly male respondents (60). Street vending occupies (16.6%) of the occupations and had greater male involvement. Waste picking consists of (15%) of occupations and had more balanced genders. Transport had (10%) of employment and included only males, and "Others" (8.3%) included only females.

Table 2: Occupational Distribution by Gender

Occupation	Male	Female	Total (%)
Construction Work	60	5	21.6%
Street Vending	35	15	16.6%
Domestic Help	5	80	28.3%
Waste Picking	20	25	15%
Transport (rickshaw, etc.)	30	0	10%
Others	0	25	8.3%

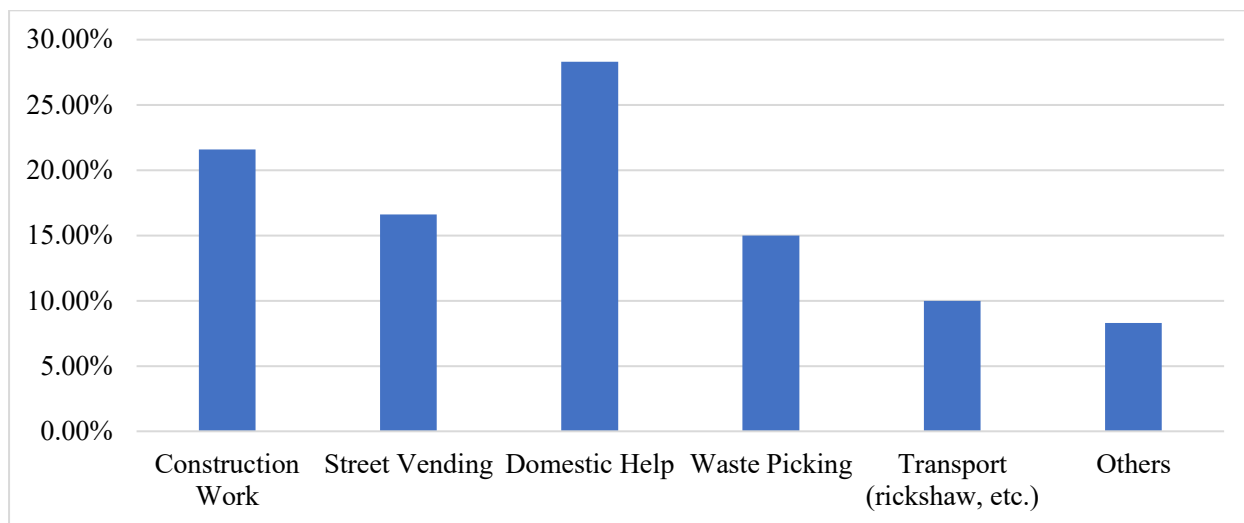


Figure 2: Graphical Representation of the Occupational Distribution by Gender

The data indicates no gender difference in the specific sector of waste picking and street vending, although we can anticipate that even at these lower ends of the labour spectrum, men are likely to dominate more labour-intensive roles (in construction and transportation). This occupational segregation suggests that there is not much upward mobility for women, and the categorization reflects structural inequality in terms of access to a range of occupations.

Table 3 gives occupational level sex-disaggregated data on knowledge and access to different welfare schemes for respondents. Generally, males had significantly more awareness and participation for all categories. For example, 37% of males are aware of the E-Shram card, while only 20% of females were aware, meaning there is a 17% gender gap. Moreover, only 5% of females are registered under PM-SYM, whereas there are 17% for men. Health insurance is also skewed towards men, where there is 23% coverage for men, compared to 12% for women. They had similar trends for general welfare access, where there is 35% male and 18% female on a scheme.

Table 3: Access to Welfare Schemes

Scheme Awareness/Access	Male	Female	Gap (%)
Aware of E-Shram Card	37%	20%	17%
Registered for PM-SYM	17%	8%	9%
Health Insurance Coverage	23%	12%	11%

Any Welfare Access	35%	18%	17%
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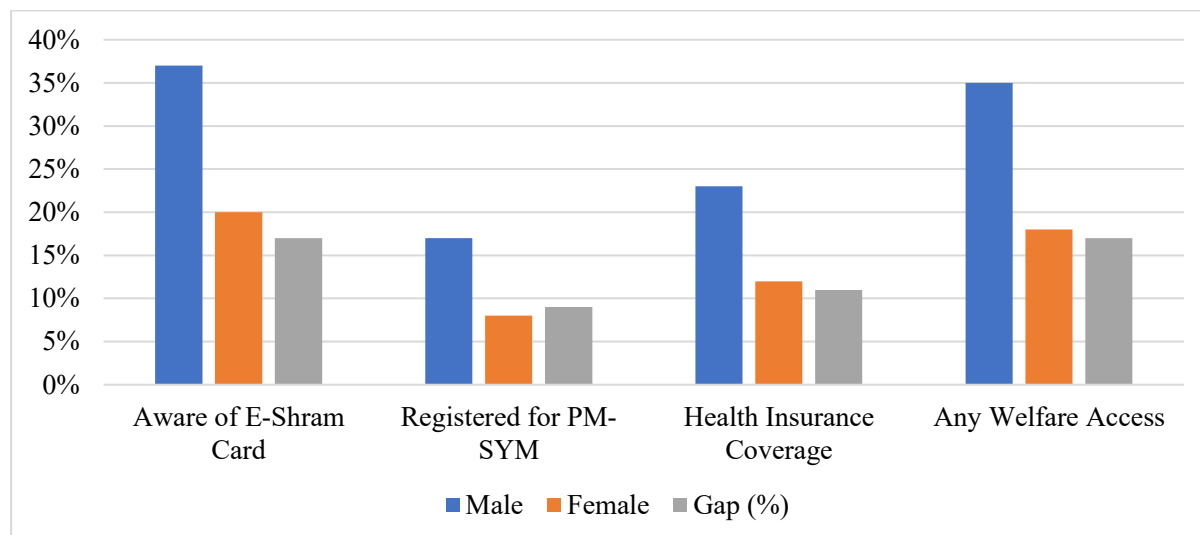


Figure 3: Graphical Representation of the Access to Welfare Schemes

The findings show a significant gender gap in awareness of and access to beneficial government welfare schemes. Women, especially those involved in informal employment, encounter significant barriers in accessing any social security benefits; probably due to issues like their literacy levels, digital exclusion, and limited mobility. The frequency of gap across all categories indicates potential systemic issues of outreach and implementing mechanisms, demonstrating the need for more targeted policy adjustments to ensure welfare schemes are inclusive, accessible, and meet the needs of female workers in the informal sector.

5. CONCLUSION

The results of this research clearly elucidate the gender-specific vulnerabilities of informal workers in urban areas of West Bengal. Male and female informal workers both operate in precarious conditions; however, women are uniquely disadvantaged by lower levels of education, prevalence in low-paying feminized occupations like domestic work, and substantially less access to welfare provision. The data reveals deeply embedded gender inequalities in occupational divisions, earnings, and social security access. There exist clear overlaps and connections of the review in solely gender identities. The data demonstrates a compelling case for comprehensive policies seeking to address structural disadvantages of women workers operating in the informal economy, through education, skills development, legal protections and welfare provision to support equitable and sustainable urban livelihoods.

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