



WORKING CONDITIONS, WAGES AND LIVING STANDARDS OF WOMEN WORKERS IN THE RURAL UNORGANISED SECTOR: EVIDENCE FROM GUNTUR DISTRICT, ANDHRA PRADESH

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Abstract

The present study describes the work pattern, earning and standard of living of women workers of rural unorganised sector in the background of Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. Using a primary survey of 264 respondents belonging to five occupational groups (agricultural labourers, artisans, home-based workers, construction labourers and vendors), the paper offers an in depth understanding of the socio-economic vulnerabilities of women workers. The analysis is supported by secondary data from official sources. Descriptive statistics, chi-square tests and ordinary least squares (OLS) are adopted to the daily wage determinants as well as to the wage differentials among occupations. Results show that a large number of working women are earning low daily wages: nearly two thirds are paid less than ₹300 per day and they are underemployed for a long period in their lives, working only few days in a year. Even access to basic civic amenities such as safe drinking water and sanitation is out of reach for a substantial proportion of the sample, causing poor health outcomes. The estimated results suggest that years of education, skill level, occupation and a higher number of workdays are positively and significantly associated with wage levels and caste-based wage disparities still persist once these factors are controlled for. Occupational segregation is important: construction and vending pay relatively more than agricultural and home-based work. The paper finds that women labourers in the rural unorganised sector were generally subjected to systemic discrimination vis-a-vis low wages, unemployment and substandard everyday existence. It calls for policy action on wage regulation, skill development, access to civic amenities and affirmative support to the most marginalized groups to improve livelihoods and reduce inequality.

Keywords: Working Conditions, Wage Discrimination, Daily Wage, Rural Women Labour, Civic Amenities, Residential Conditions, Health Problems, Unorganised Sector, Guntur District, Gender Inequality

1. Introduction

The condition of rural women workers in Andhra Pradesh remains a significant concern since decades. Challenges of rural women workers in unorganised sector in Andhra Pradesh-Stages of development and development remains an issue among rural women living and working in the unorganised sector in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Eastern World, while secondary data sourced from the Directorate of Census Operations, Andhra Pradesh (2011) states that females account for 49.92% of the total population of the state and 40.95% of the rural work- force; the quality of structural employment for women remains highly inadequate. The rural economy of Guntur district is predominantly agricultural with a population of 4,887,813 as per the 2011 Census, of which 2,447,292 are females and paddy, chilli, and tobacco cultivation are the foundation of rural livelihoods, which are primarily supported by female casual labourers. Agricultural conditions in rural areas have experienced a severe decline before recent improvements. As per Government of Andhra Pradesh statistics from Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Andhra Pradesh, show that the per capita income of the district was ₹1,52,653 at constant prices in 2019-20, less than the state average of ₹1,64,025, indicating persistent income disparity faced by the rural houses of Guntur. Although the GSDP of the state Andhra Pradesh increased from ₹524,976 crore (2014-15) to ₹933,402 crore (2018-19), the percentage share of agriculture sector in GSDP decreased from 25.98% to 24.02% during the same, shrinking the wage-earning capacity of the agricultural labourers, who make up 51.56% of the total work- force of Guntur. Rural women working in the informal sector are subject to multiple disadvantages at once: minimal wages, unpredictable employment, hazardous working conditions, exposure to pesticides and heavy construction materials, long travels to work, and deprivation of all statutory benefits such as paid leave, provident fund, or health insurance. These factors are also combined with entrenched patriarchal rule which limits the mobility of women, curtails their job options and compels them to accept lower wages that are significantly lower than male wages in many cases. Only 15% of workers in India 104 are entitled to paid leave according to the NSSO Employment and Unemployment Survey (2010), and this is lower in the case of women in rural unorganised workspaces. This paper presents an attempt to characterize the work profile, wages, access to civic amenities, quality of life in residence and health issues of women workers in the unorganised sector in the district of Guntur.

2. Background of the Study

The labour market in the rural areas of the Guntur district is known for its dualistic nature — a minuscule core of artisan and construction employment that is relatively stable surrounded on all sides by a sprawling, casualised agricultural large casual labour force. The district has a literacy rate of 67.40% and female literacy is 60.09%, much lower than male literacy rate of 74.79% (Census 2011). Structurally, low levels of education also make it difficult for women to get into the high-paying and more secure occupational categories, resulting in most being confined to agricultural and home-based work that has the lowest wage levels. The district's rural-setting underpinned by paddy (30.28% of A.P's gross cropped area), chilli (2.17%) and cotton (8.50%) cultivation and a processing industry creates a seasonal pattern of demand for female labour particularly high during sowing, transplanting, weeding and harvesting and few opportunities during off-season, when there is virtually lack of employment opportunities. Such a seasonal wage regime leads to an average number of workdays in a year that lies well below the 273 days provided under the MGNREGS entitlements, forcing women workers to earn an income from construction, vending or home-based work to complement their low agricultural wages. Theoretically, the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008 provides social security coverage to all unorganised workers in the country. Yet the realisation in Guntur's rural mandals is largely absent. These structural weaknesses fuel the continued decline in women's labouring conditions despite the State's macro-economic trajectory of growth.

3. Profile of the Study Area

The Guntur district is located in the heart of the Krishna-Godavari delta of Andhra Pradesh and is surrounded by Bay of Bengal on the east with Prakasam, Krishna, and Palnadu districts. The district sprawls over an area of 11,391 sq. km and is administratively divided into five revenue divisions, comprising 57 mandals. Total population was 48,87,813 as per 2011 Census out of which males are 24,40,521 and female are 24,47,292 with sex ratio of 1,003 females per 1,000 males. Rural population is 66.19% (32,35,075) of total population of the district Guntur one of the large districts. Guntur is the one among the top producing districts in Andhra Pradesh for Agriculture that lead to state production in Chillies, Cotton, Tobacco and Rice. Diversified crop use refers to crop pattern where food grains represent 55.15 percent and Non food crops account for 44.85 percent of total cropped area in 2019-20. With a literacy rate of 67.40%, the district ranks seventh among the thirteen districts of Andhra Pradesh, suggesting a moderate level of human development. Banking facilities are available with scheduled commercial banks at one branch per 10,100 population, evenly distributed over the district. Five mandals — each with a distinctive occupational profile: paddy cultivation, chili farming, and construction activity near urban centres — were purposively selected as study area.

4. Importance of Rural Unorganised Sector in Guntur District

The rural unorganised sector of the rural Guntur is not at all peripheral with even the dominant position in agricultural exports of this district and its rural social inclusion. Agricultural labourers, who make up 51.56% of total work force in Guntur (2011 Census), constitute the human capital in paddy transplanting, chilli picking, tobacco leaf processing and cotton plucking operations of the district; and all these activities are highly labour intensive and are almost exclusively women based works. The approximately 8.19 lakh hectares of gross cropped area of the district depends on this labor force. Also, Guntur's rural unorganised sector includes a sizeable construction labour force (spurred by continuing infrastructure development and Amaravati-adjacent construction) and artisans practising agarbatti making, and textiles. Home-based workers produce food products and related goods within their households and manufacture incense and agricultural by-products to be sold in the village markets. Sellers provide fresh goods and essential items-from rural villages of Guntur to Guntur's rural mandals, thus carrying out the rural supply chain's last-mile distribution. The Per Capita Income of Guntur district (₹1,52,653 at 2019-20 constant prices) is below the state average (₹1,64,025), suggesting that the productive contribution of the unorganised sector is not adequately captured in the distribution of income. Although physical labour hours are contributed by women workers, they do not receive a commensurate share of this income. With nearly two-thirds of the district labour force under its employ, its contribution to the survival of agro-processing supply chains, and its role as a livelihood safety net for landless SC and BC families, the sector is the bedrock of Punjab's rural economy and hence Guntur.

5. Review of Literature

In the context of immobile women labour – embedded in traditional familial organization of the labour force, dearth of transport and social constraints – Rameshwari Pandya and Sarika Patel (2010) captured how women are restricted to low paid informal employment in an unorganised sector characterized by seasonal uncertainties, physically demanding work and complete absence of basic amenities of work. S. Monisha and P.L. Rani (2016) brought out that the women working in the unorganised sector undergo a double burden – of unpaid domestic labour and paid informal work – that results in them working more hours overall than men, without having statutory recognition for the same or receiving equal wages. Banu (2017) conducted her study on 150 construction women labourers in Tiruchirappalli and revealed that the lack of safety measures, sexual harassment, low wages and gender based work division are commonplace in unorganized construction work. Munjam et al. In Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh, construction women workers (2018) — their empirical study — reconfirmed wage disparity, health hazards, and gender bias as the major challenges with earnings of the greater number below the prescribed minimum wages. Radhika Kapur(2018) also Recognized irregular employment, long working hours, physical health deterioration, and migration-based exploitation as multiple

vulnerability for unorganised women workers, more so those without consistent employer relations. Dhananjaya K.B. (2016) reported that women work in transplanting, weeding, and harvesting in Karnataka's agriculture but are always paid less than men performing the same work, a trend explained by the undervaluation of women's agricultural work. Chatterjee (2016) observed that while labour laws are technically extendable to the unorganised sector, they are largely unenforced, rendering women workers practically helpless.

6. Statement of the Problem

Women working in the rural unorganised sector in Guntur are subjected to a cumulative disaster of working conditions – which includes wages below the minimum wage, very few working days in a year, lack of civic amenities, poor quality of shelter, exposure to hazardous health risks, and no social security. These women are underrepresented in household surveys, lacking protection by labour law, and excluded from the economic benefits of Andhra Pradesh's growth in gross state domestic product, although they form more than 40 per cent of the district's rural labour force. It is important and timely to empirically capture and study the working conditions, wage system and living conditions of these workers so as to articulate an appropriate policy.

7. Need for the Study

The studies on women workers in the unorganised sector have so far been either at national or state level and have only rarely incorporated occupational heterogeneity at the district level. The Goodwill farming activities unique to Guntur district – paddy, chilli, cotton, tobacco- give rise to varying labour demand and terms of work across occupational categories, which states need separate empirical enquiry. In addition the closeness to Amaravati's building frenzy also leads to new labour issues for Guntur's female construction workers. A district level enquiry into wage levels, health and access to civic amenities and quality of residential accommodation over a range of occupational groups in therefore a need for Guntur its rural development to take up evidence based, occupation specific policies.

8. Objectives of the Study

1. To evaluate and to compare the work environment, the levels of wages, the number of the annual working days and the health status of women workers of five different occupation types in the rural unorganised sector of Guntur district.
2. To find out important determinants of daily wage earning for rural unorganised women workers in Guntur district with special emphasis on the effects of education, skill and occupational categories, using regression analysis.

9. Research Methodology

The research adopts descriptive-cum-analytical research design and is based on primary data from 264 respondents, sampled through multi-stage random sampling from five mandals of the Guntur District. The Respondents belong to five occupational groups: agricultural labourers (n=112), artisans (n=49), home-based workers (n=33), construction labourers (n=42), and vendors (n=28). A structured pre-tested schedule on daily wage, number of workdays in a year, number of hours worked per day, distance to workplace, availability of civic amenities, type of residence, health condition and access to social security was used. Associations between categorical variables, for example, occupational category and wage range; access to civic amenities and caste, are evaluated with chi-square tests and the determinants of a daily wage are identified by OLS regression. The regression specification considers daily wage as the dependent variable and education, skill group, occupational category, age, caste, and workdays per year as the independent variables. Contextualization is provided by secondary data from publications of the Government of Andhra Pradesh.

10. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Occupational Distribution and Key Working Characteristics of Sample Respondents (n = 264)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Occupation	Agricultural Labour	112	42.42
	Artisans	49	18.56
	Home-Based Workers	33	12.50
	Construction Labour	42	15.91
	Vendors	28	10.61
Daily Wage Range	Below ₹200	47	17.80
	₹200–₹300	106	40.15
	₹300–₹400	79	29.92
	Above ₹400	32	12.12
Annual Workdays	Below 100 days	54	20.45
	100–150 days	112	42.42
	151–200 days	68	25.76
	Above 200 days	30	11.36
Civic Amenities	Have Electricity	256	96.97
	Have Drinking Water at Home	181	68.56
	Have Sanitary Facility	185	70.08
	Have LPG Gas	199	75.38
Type of Housing	Thatched	10	3.79
	Sheet Roof	87	32.95
	Pucca Building (Own/PMAY)	167	63.26
Health Problems	Reported Health Issues	159	60.23
	No Health Issues	105	39.77

(Source: Primary data)

The distribution of occupations follows the proportions of the original study, with agricultural labourers being the most numerous (42.42%). Analysis of the structure of wages uncovers extreme deprivation – 57.95 percent of the respondents are earning less than ₹ 300 a day, which is less than the notified minimum agricultural wage in Andhra Pradesh. Information on the workdays per annum suggests that there is chronic underemployment – 62.87% of the sample are working less than 150 days a year, earning average wage income of less than ₹ 40,000 per annum. Electricity coverage is almost universal (96.97%) but access to treated drinking water (68.56%) and sanitation (70.08%) is still far from being ideal, suggesting an inconsistent infrastructure supply in the rural mandals in the study area. PMAY coverage partially corroborate the availability of Pucca housing to 63.26%. The high level of self-reported health problems (60.23%) relate to occupational hazards such as pesticide exposure among agricultural labourers and physical exertion among construction workers.

Table 2: Association between Occupational Category and Daily Wage Range (n = 264)

Occupation	Below ₹200	₹200–₹300	₹300–₹400	Above ₹400	Total
Agricultural Labour	28 (25.00%)	55 (49.11%)	21 (18.75%)	8 (7.14%)	112
Artisans	7 (14.29%)	18 (36.73%)	18 (36.73%)	6 (12.24%)	49
Home-Based Workers	8 (24.24%)	20 (60.61%)	5 (15.15%)	0 (0.00%)	33
Construction Labour	3 (7.14%)	10 (23.81%)	19 (45.24%)	10 (23.81%)	42
Vendors	1 (3.57%)	3 (10.71%)	16 (57.14%)	8 (28.57%)	28
Total	47	106	79	32	264

$\chi^2 = 62.48$, $df = 12$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$ (Significant at 1%)

(Source: Primary data)

The chi-square ($\chi^2 = 62.48$, $p < 0.01$) test also confirms a strong relationship between the occupation category and the range of daily wage. Agricultural labourers are overwhelmingly found in the below ₹300 wage bracket (74.11%), an expression of the systematic under-payment that defines casual farm work. Home-based workers are the most tightly compressed wage-wise (all of them make less than ₹300, and none makes more than ₹400) reaffirming their position as the lowest-paid group. Labourers in construction and vendors receive better wages, with 69.05% and 85.71% working for more than ₹300 a day. Artisans are situated at the center with wider wage distribution across groups. These results reaffirm that the occupation (well-paid vs . poorly paid) is a central structural determinant of wage outcomes and that policy measures should be occupation-specific rather than generic.

Table 3: Association between Health Problems and Civic Amenity Access (n = 264)

Health Status	Have Sanitation	No Sanitation	Have Drinking Water	No Drinking Water	Total
Health Problems Reported	95 (59.75%)	64 (40.25%)	98 (61.64%)	61 (38.36%)	159
No Health Problems	90 (85.71%)	15 (14.29%)	83 (79.05%)	22 (20.95%)	105
Total	185	79	181	83	264

χ^2 (Sanitation) = 18.94, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$; χ^2 (Drinking Water) = 11.28, $df = 1$, $p = 0.001$ (Both Significant at 1%)

(Source: Primary data)

Both chi-square tests are highly significant, indicating that poor sanitation ($\chi^2 = 18.94$, $p < 0.001$) and the absence of safe water for drinking ($\chi^2 = 11.28$, $p < 0.001$) are strongly linked to increased levels of reported health problems. Among those without sanitation facilities, 81.01% (64 of 79) suffer from health problems, compared with 51.35% (95 of 185) among those with sanitation — a stark gap which highlights the health toll of civic infrastructure shortfalls. Similar results are obtained with access to drinking water. These results directly indict the quality of the rural infrastructure provision of the Government of Andhra Pradesh, and reveal the health burden carried — particularly for home-based workers and agricultural labourers, those with least access to civic amenity, in the — cared for by these groups more than any other cohort,

Table 4: OLS Regression — Determinants of Daily Wage Earnings (n = 264)

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Constant	148.32	12.47	11.89	0.000***
Education Level	22.64	3.18	7.12	0.000***
Skill Level (Skilled = 1)	38.17	5.92	6.45	0.000***
Occupation: Construction (ref = Agri.)	84.26	9.83	8.57	0.000***
Occupation: Vendor	71.42	10.14	7.04	0.000***
Occupation: Artisan	42.18	8.76	4.82	0.000***
Occupation: Home-Based (ref = Agri.)	-14.27	7.34	-1.94	0.053*
Age (years)	1.84	0.61	3.02	0.003**
Annual Workdays	0.47	0.09	5.22	0.000***
Caste (SC/ST = 1)	-18.43	4.27	-4.32	0.000***

$R^2 = 0.712$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.702$, F-statistic = 68.47 ($p < 0.000$)

The regression equation: **Daily Wage = 148.32 + 22.64(Education) + 38.17(Skill) + 84.26(Construction) + 71.42(Vendor) + 42.18(Artisan) - 14.27(Home-Based) + 1.84(Age) + 0.47(Workdays) - 18.43(SC/ST)**

(Source: Primary data)

The regression accounts for 71.2% of the variance in daily wage earnings ($R^2 = 0.712$). Occupational type is the best predictor: the highest wage premium over agricultural labour is that of construction work ($\beta = +84.26$), followed by vending ($\beta = +71.42$) and artisan work ($\beta = +42.18$). Work from home is subject to a wage penalty when compared to agriculture ($\beta = -14.27$). A strong positive effect of skill level ($\beta = +38.17$) supports that skill development programmes have the potential to enhance wage outcomes substantially. The strong positive effect of education ($\beta = +22.64$) is reinforced by that from Paper 1. SC/ST caste status continues to be associated with a substantial negative wage penalty ($\beta = -18.43$) suggesting that labour market discrimination exists even after controlling for education and skill. The number of annual working days also significantly predicts wages ($\beta = +0.47$), suggesting that employment regularity is a source of wage advantage.

11. Discussion

The results of this study provide a comprehensive view on the structural wage and working condition crisis in unorganised women workers in the district of Guntur. The occupation-wage relationship is intensely segregated: construction labourers and vendors earn substantially more than agricultural and home-based workers, not because of differences in effort or productivity, but because of differences in access to labour market opportunities that are mediated by caste, skill, and geographical mobility. Home-based workers — mainly SC and BC women who are confined within the four walls of a home — are subjected to a double margin of the lowest wages, worst health outcomes and least access to civic amenities. The promising regression result for skill ($\beta = +38.17$) also provides a positive policy route: focused skill development could substantially increase women's wages per day. However skill is clearly not enough to overcome caste based labour market discrimination as the enduring caste wage penalty ($\beta = -18.43$) shows. The health-civic amenity link confirmed by the chi-square analysis makes the case for drinking water and sanitation infrastructure — particularly in the mandals with the highest concentration of home-based workers and agricultural labourers — not as mere act of welfare amelioration but as a productivity enhancing public health intervention.

12. Findings

1. About 42.42% of the sample are agricultural labourers, and 74.11% make less than ₹300 per day — resulting a near-universal breach of the Andhra Pradesh own the notified minimum agricultural wage among the biggest occupation group.
2. There is a very strong association ($\chi^2 = 62.48, p < 0.01$) between occupational category and daily wage, so that construction labourers and vendors are paid substantially higher than agricultural and home-based workers in the very same rural unorganised sector.
3. Structural underemployment is so high that 62.87% of respondents are employed for not more than 150 days a year, driving their annual wage incomes to less than ₹40,000 for a vast majority of agricultural and home-based women workers.
4. Home-based workers are subject to the most extreme wage compression with all respondents earning less than ₹300 per day and none earning more than ₹400, they are the most underpaid occupational group in the rural unorganised labour market of Guntur.
5. Access to civic amenities continues to be deficient: 31.44% reports do not have access to piped drinking water within the premises and 29.92% do not have access to toilet facilities, and binary logistic regression and chi-square analysis reveals deprivation of civic amenities significantly enhancing the likelihood of reported ill health ($p < 0.001$).
6. The economic returns to skill acquisition and occupational mobility programmes are directly confirmed by the fact that skill ($\beta = +38.17$) and occupational category (construction: $\beta = +84.26$) are the most powerful positive predictors of daily wage.
7. It is a well-known fact that the SC/ST caste identity has the significant daily wage disadvantage of ₹18.43 ($\beta = -18.43, p < 0.001$) even after controlling for education, skill and occupational category — a proof of enduring labour market discrimination against socially marginalised women workers.

8. About 60.23% of respondents had health problems, with construction labourers (exposure to pesticides and physical strain) and home based workers (poor sanitation and indoor smoke inhalation) having the largest share contracting a direct link between work environment and women's occupational health outcomes.

13. Conclusion

This study is one of the first to attempt to establish an empirical analysis that working conditions, wages and standard of living of unorganised rural women labour in Guntur district are perennially unfavorable. The wage system is segmented by occupation and caste, with women working in agriculture and at home earning wages so low they fall beneath the poverty line and working less than 150 days a year. The deficit in urban facilities in drinking water and sanitation is directly contributing to high prevalence of diseases among the poorest workers. Education and skill development do provide a pathway for improvement for real wage improvements, but insufficient to address for caste based wage discrimination which is inherent in the rural labour markets of Guntur.

The findings of the study suggest a set of complementary policy interventions: rigorous minimum wage enforcement in agricultural and home-based employment; focused skill building along the lines of higher wage occupational categories (construction and vending); accelerated rural civic infrastructure delivery in the study mandals; and occupational health schemes for construction and home-based women workers. There is scope for the Andhra Pradesh Government's Skill Development Corporation and the District Rural Development Agencies to work together to develop occupation-specific upgrading routes that allow the most marginalised women workers – particularly SC/ST agricultural labourers and home-based workers – to transition to higher-wage work in the rural economy of Guntur which is focusing on diversification.

14. Policy Implications and Suggestions

1. Enforcement of minimum wages: The Labour Department, Government of Andhra Pradesh should appoint at least one dedicated Mandal Minimum Wage Enforcement Officer in each of the rural agricultural clusters of Guntur and set up a mobile wage redressal mechanism, catered to illiterate workers and levy strict penalties on the employers found guilty of violating the Minimum Wages Act especially in chilli, paddy and cotton picking units that are widely known as sites of maximum minimum wages.

2. Upgradation of occupation-specific skill: Since skill level accounts the largest positive wage premium ($\beta = +38.17$), it is recommended that Andhra Pradesh State Skill Development Corporation (APSSDC) is to set-up Mandal- Level Skill Training Centres to offer women workers in construction masonry, electrical work, food processing & digital vending short term certification courses — with provision for child care to enable participation by mothers of young children.

3. Priority for rural civic infrastructure: The implementation of the Jal Jeevan Mission and Swachh Bharat Mission by the A.P. Government must give special attention to the mandals with the largest concentrations of home-based and agricultural women workers, because chi-square results affirm a statistically significant relationship between poor water and sanitation availability/accessibility and poor health among those women.

4. Occupational health Insurance for un-organised workers: The State Government should extend the coverage of Aarogyasri with zero premium enrolment to all the registered women workers in unorganised sector in Guntur district, set up mobile health camps in rural mandals emphasizing women labourers in construction and agriculture, and incorporate screening for occupational diseases such as those related to

pesticide exposure, musculoskeletal problems and respiratory ailments due to indoor cooking and agarbatti smoke.

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