Bridging the Gender Gap: Rethinking Equity, Safety, and Leadership in Garment Manufacturing Industries

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Abstract

Women workers face persistent gender disparities in wages, limited career advancement, unsafe working conditions, and inadequate work-life balance support in garment manufacturing factories in Tiruppur. The garment manufacturing industry achieves $40 billion in exports, and the benefits for the local, state, and national economies are transformative. Currently, Tiruppur employs approximately 600,000 workers; the export scale generates between 800,000 and 1 million jobs, both direct and indirect. The women workforce of 60- 65% is involved in stitching, checking, and packing. The study evaluates the demographic profile of the women and analyses the gender differences in pay, benefits, and maternity care among female textile workers employed in the Tiruppur garment manufacturing sector. In order to offer evidence-based suggestions for enhancing gender equity, safety, and inclusion in the garment manufacturing industries, research examines working circumstances, such as workplace safety, harassment prevention strategies, and workplace decision-making. 216 stitching women workers from 36 factories, comprising both local and interstate migrant populations, participated in structured questionnaires and interviews as part of this mixed-methods study to investigate these issues.

Keywords

Introduction

Tiruppur is one of India's major garment manufacturing hubs in Tamil Nadu, which contributes significantly to the export economy with an approximate 40 billion dollars in exports, accounting for 55% of the country's knitwear exports (A.Sakthivel, 2025) . The sector directly employs an estimated 600,000 workers, and approximately one million jobs are indirectly created through direct and indirect employment. It is remarkable that women make up 60-65% of the

workforce and are primarily involved in low-skill, wage-intensive jobs like stitching, checking, and packing.

Overlooked gender inequalities, lack of grievance system persist for women garment manufacturing factory employees, including narrow pay gaps with women earning 20-30% less than men for equivalent work (Forum, 2023), alongside scarce leadership roles, maternity benefits, unsafe workplaces (Al-Bayati, 2024) and rigid factory schedules without childcare options, limited governance participation, and entrenched structural barriers.

Literature Review

The garment industry in South Asia has undergone significant expansion over the past few decades, particularly in India, which is playing an important role in the global supply chain (UNBHR, 2024). This growth has been accompanied by increased participation of women, especially in export hubs like Tiruppur, where women constitute a majority of the workforce in core production roles such as stitching and quality control (ILO, 2018) . While this feminisation of labour has provided employment opportunities for women from marginalised and rural backgrounds, it has not necessarily translated into improved working conditions or equitable outcomes (Mezzadri, 2017)

Gender Inequities in Wages and Career Advancement

Numerous studies have highlighted gender-based wage gaps in the garment sector, with women consistently earning 20–30% less than men for equivalent work (Forum, 2023) . These disparities are attributed to both direct discrimination and structural barriers such as occupational segregation, lack of union representation, and limited access to training and promotions (N.Neetha, 2002). Leadership representation remains critically low, with women rarely promoted to supervisory or managerial roles, despite their dominance in the workforce (Hoyt, 2010) .

Workplace Safety and Harassment

Workplace safety is a critical concern in the garment sector. A study (Al-Bayati, 2024) notes that most PPE and tools are not designed for women's use, making them both ineffective and unsafe. Harassment, including verbal abuse and unwanted attention from supervisors, remains rampant and underreported, particularly among migrant women workers who lack local support networks (Watch, 2022). Although mechanisms like the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) exist under India's POSH Act (2013), their implementation is often weak or superficial (ILO, 2018).

Work-Life Balance and Unpaid Care Responsibilities

Research on women's labour in the Global South has consistently noted the double burden women face in balancing paid work and unpaid care duties (Fuhua Zhai, 2022) . In the Tiruppur garment sector, rigid work schedules, a lack of crèches, and the absence of maternity support compound stress and absenteeism (SAVE, 2023). These factors affect retention and productivity and reflect societal expectations of women's caregiving roles.

Migrant Women's Vulnerabilities

Interstate and intrastate migrant women face heightened vulnerabilities, including wage withholding, dependency on contractors, isolation, and restricted mobility (ICN, 2016) . These

factors increase their risk of exploitation and hinder access to grievance redressal systems. Research shows that language barriers and fear of retaliation discourage women from reporting rights violations (Bhattercharjee, 2018).

Gaps in Gender Sensitisation and Participation

Despite industry commitments to corporate social responsibility and international codes of conduct, gender sensitisation efforts remain weak. Few workers report participating in such training, and even fewer perceive managerial commitment to gender equity (FWF, 2021).There is also limited literature that speaks about women's participation and factory-level decision-making, including health and safety committees or worker forums or trade unions (JASS, 2022)

Knowledge Gaps Addressed by This Study

The existing literature provides critical insights into the structural issues facing women garment workers; however, there is a lack of recent, location-specific empirical data from Tiruppur, particularly since the pandemic. Additionally:

- Few studies combine quantitative and qualitative methods to capture the full spectrum of challenges and worker perceptions.
- There is limited focus on migrant vs. non-migrant women's experiences within the same labour context.
- The effectiveness of formal mechanisms, such as ICCs and grievance systems, remains underexplored from the perspective of workers.
- Literature often overlooks intersections of gender, age, migration, and employment tenure, which are crucial for designing inclusive labour policies.

Research Objectives

1. To assess the demographic profile of the women workers in the garment manufacturing industries in Tiruppur.
2. To examine gender disparities in wages, benefits, and maternity support.
3. To study working conditions, including workplace safety, harassment prevention mechanisms, and workplace decision-making.
4. To provide evidence-based recommendations for improving gender equity, safety, and inclusion in the garment manufacturing industry.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative surveys with structured interviews to examine gender-specific challenges faced by women workers in Tiruppur's garment manufacturing industry. This approach allowed for both breadth and depth in understanding workplace gender dynamics, enabling triangulation of data across different factory environments and worker experiences.

Study Population and Sampling

The research focused exclusively on women stitching workers employed in 36 garment manufacturing factories in Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu, with a total of 2,028 stitching workers. A purposive sampling method was used to recruit a total of 216 women workers, ensuring representation across different factory sizes and including both migrant and non-migrant workers, thereby reflecting the demographic diversity of the region.

The following ethical standards have been followed throughout the research process:

- Consent has been obtained in writing from all participants.
- Confidentiality and anonymity have been assured, and no personally identifying information has been recorded.
- Participation was strictly voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any time without consequence.
- The research design and tools have been reviewed internally for ethical compliance with norms of research involving vulnerable worker populations.

Data Collection Methods

The workers' interview was conducted with a structured questionnaire that focused on key dimensions such as:

- Wage equity and benefits (especially maternity support),
- Working conditions and gender-sensitive safety practices,
- Sexual harassment and grievance redressal mechanisms,
- Work-life balance, including childcare and flexible work options,
- Participation in decision-making and committee structures,
- Gender awareness and sensitivity training.

Demographic Profile of the Workers

Participants were stitching machine operators (79%). The age distribution is 47% aged 25–34 and 43% aged 35–44, ensuring responses from both young and mid-career workers. Notably, 98% of the respondents had 2–5 years of work experience, providing well-informed insights into their factory conditions and practices. The interstate migrant is 44% and non-migrant (56%) workers, reflecting the demographic diversity of the region.

Limitations of the Methodology

While the sample size of 216 respondents provided rich insights, the study is limited to Tiruppur and may not fully reflect conditions in other garment clusters. Language barriers, time constraints, and hesitancy to speak on sensitive topics such as harassment may have affected the depth of some responses. However, triangulation of methods helped mitigate these limitations and improve the reliability of findings

Results

The survey results portray a multifaceted and intricate scenario regarding women workers' experiences in the garment manufacturing industry, showcasing both advancements and enduring systemic gaps in gender equity, safety, and voice.

Wages and Benefits

Although a significant portion of respondents (69%) believed equal pay exists, only half (50%) believed they were fairly paid, and 24% complained of bias. This indicates a gap between perception and reality. While 71% claimed no gender bias in bonuses, the overwhelming 71% disagreement regarding the fairness of maternity support underscores a critical gap in social responsiveness. This suggests that while formal wage parity is improving, systemic gender bias in non-wage benefits and gendered structures persist unaddressed.

Working Conditions

A slight majority (59%) believed the workplace was safe for women. However, one in five disagreed, and a significant proportion of 21% stayed neutral, indicating ambivalence or fear. Even more illuminating is the response regarding Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Only 14% viewed the provision of gendered PPE positively, while an astonishing 68% chose neutrality. This neutrality may indicate a lack of information, inadequate training, or routinised gender insensitivity in the provision of tools, highlighting the need for targeted, gender-responsive safety audits.

System of Reporting Harassment as well as Resolving Complaints

Only 45% of respondents believed that harassment was absolutely not tolerated within the institution, while 26% disagreed and 29% opted for neutrality. The latter two options suggest considerable uncertainty, perhaps fear. The lack of trust in institutional mechanisms is more concerning complaint mechanisms were distrusted by 61% of the respondents, while 63% felt unsafe reporting issues. A striking 64% disagreed that the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) functioned well, indicating a clear gap between policy frameworks and their implementation. Findings highlight the gaps in providing grievance handling systems that require trust, adequate training, and responsibility, including in the areas of strategic accountability.

Balancing Professional and Personal Responsibilities

A total of 23% of respondents felt their childcare responsibilities were supported; however, more than half (60%) disagreed. Moreover, only 22% of the respondents believed that flexible work arrangements were offered in a fair manner, with 59% disagreeing. It therefore appears that a lack of flexibility in working arrangements impacts women disproportionately. The response indicating that 43% have experienced discriminatory treatment because of family responsibilities depicts persistent, deeply entrenched social norms that penalise caregiving roles.

Participation and Voice

The absence of voice and inclusion is arguably the most worrisome. More than half (55%) disagreed, with only 31% believing women should be on committees. Similarly, only 26% thought management consulted employees, and only 22% felt heard. These figures show a glaring gender disparity in participatory processes, with few opportunities for women to take leadership positions

or have an impact on choices. In addition to reflecting subpar inclusion methods, the lack of voice could also be a contributing factor to the general discontent with working conditions and the grievance redress process.

Conclusion

Prioritising focused actions is necessary to improve gender equity in the garment manufacturing industry. First, given that 71% of workers believe the current rules are unfair, it is imperative to increase maternity and social benefits. Second, there is an urgent need to overhaul grievance redressal procedures. AI-driven tools have the potential to be revolutionary, as 61% of workers reject the process and 64% believe Internal Complaints Committees(ICCs) are useless. Digital systems can facilitate anonymous reporting, publicly track complaints, and identify retaliatory threats or recurring concerns using predictive analytics. ICCs can handle cases more effectively and fairly with the use of dashboards and notifications.

Priority should be given to women's safety advocates, gender-sensitive safety audits, and PPE that fits women better. Fifty-five per cent of women still feel excluded from committees and decision-making processes. Women's perspectives and involvement can be amplified through gender-balanced representation, leadership development, and Artificial Intelligence-powered feedback systems. Ultimately, it's crucial to support family-friendly policies and flexible work arrangements. Many employees experienced discrimination for providing care, and more than half of the workers thought that the present methods were unjust. Companies should employ performance evaluation methods that go beyond physical presence, train supervisors on gender awareness, and offer caregiving leave.

Acknowledgement

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