



# Empowering Women In India's Informal Sector: Stories Of Resilience And Advocacy

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	<p>In informal sector settings, labourers confront physically strenuous tasks, paltry incomes, unfavorable work environments, and a glaring absence of others amenities and facilities. Economic necessity often forces many women into these environments, where they endure not only strenuous work but also other adverse conditions, along with pregnancy-based discrimination, excessive overtime, and the burden of working seven days a week. This constitutes a grave violation of minimum requirements of labours, as well all workers deserve dignified treatment. The article explores the plight of economically vulnerable women in the informal sectors of highlighting the urgent need for enhanced labour protections and rights enforcement. An influx of migrant women into India's Durgapur Industrial Belt, which is experiencing significant industrial growth, raises concerns about problems and inadequate grievance redressal mechanisms. The study presents a thematic analysis emphasizing problems and advocating for an improved grievance redressal framework to empower and protect this vulnerable workforce. Comprehensive analysis reveals crucial aspects of migrant women's employment experiences in the region and proposes measures for their betterment.</p>
	<p><b>Keywords:</b> Women, Grievance, Migration, Informal sector.</p>

## Introduction

India, with its diverse cultural, social, and economic landscape, presents a complex web of challenges and opportunities for women. Psychologically, traditional patriarchal values have instilled a sense of fear and apprehension in women, particularly when venturing into public spaces, such as markets, at night (Jackson, 2010). This deeply ingrained mindset has implications for women's mobility, independence, and self-esteem, perpetuating a culture of fear and constraint (Seegobin, 2019). Societal norms and gender roles, influenced by caste, class, religion, and region, have a significant impact on women's roles and expectations (Sinha, 2017). While these norms have gradually evolved, traditional gender roles continue to dictate women's access to education, employment, and decision-making power. The diverse social fabric, while enriching, can also be constricting for women who aspire to challenge these age-old norms. Economically, despite expanding opportunities, women in India still face wage disparities, limited access to formal employment, and an unequal burden of unpaid care work (Rani, et al., 2022). Economic empowerment is considered a critical avenue for gender equality, as it can enhance women's financial independence and challenge traditional power structures.

In the political sphere, women have made significant strides, with several prominent female leaders shaping India's governance (Thomas, et al., 2023). However, women's political participation remains unequal, marked by underrepresentation in decision-making bodies. Political empowerment is crucial for addressing gender disparities and amplifying women's voices in shaping the nation's future. Regionally and culturally, India's diversity is reflected in variations in customs, traditions, and social norms, which can profoundly impact the status and rights of women (Banu, et al., 2021). These regional differences often result in stark contrasts in the lived experiences of women across the country. Moreover, culture plays a pivotal role in shaping gender norms and expectations, given India's rich cultural heritage (Banerjee, 2023). Cultural practices, deeply intertwined with traditional gender roles, can either empower or constrain women. Thus, the delicate balance between preserving cultural heritage and advancing gender equality is essential. In this multidimensional context, the status of women in India reflects ongoing social transformations, legal

reforms, and evolving gender roles in a rapidly changing world. These complexities underline the need for sustained efforts to achieve gender equality and empowerment for women across the country.

Migrant women, in particular, find themselves in a situation characterized by a double vulnerability. This vulnerability arises from the combination of factors, including the relatively low income of their husbands and the economic necessity of their families (Smith, 2019). When the family's economic needs are not met by their husbands' income alone, migrant women are compelled to enter the labour force. In these circumstances, they often face an additional layer of economic strain (Jones & Brown, 2020). One prominent issue faced by migrant women in the labour force is the significant wage gap between men and women (Johnson et al., 2018). The remuneration they receive for their labour is consistently lower than what their male counterparts earn for similar work (Smith, 2019). This wage disparity further exacerbates the financial challenges faced by these women and their families (Johnson et al., 2018). The presence of a proper grievance redressal mechanism within a company or organization can significantly impact the sense of security and well-being experienced by these women (Anderson, 2021). An effective mechanism for addressing workplace grievances can provide them with a channel to voice their concerns and seek resolutions without fear of reprisal (Anderson, 2021). Unfortunately, the reality in many instances, particularly in the Durgapur area, is that grievance redressal mechanisms are either absent or inadequately functional (Brown & White, 2022). As a result of this deficiency in grievance redressal, migrant women working in the informal sector in Durgapur are left vulnerable to a range of hardships (Brown & White, 2022). These vulnerabilities encompass not only economic challenges but also extend to mental well-being (Jones & Brown, 2020). They may face unsafe working conditions, physical and verbal abuse, and discrimination, both at the workplace and in society at large (Johnson et al., 2018). The absence of an effective grievance redressal mechanism further compounds their vulnerability, leaving them with limited recourse for addressing these issues (Brown & White, 2022).

Migrant women in Durgapur have many problems, not only due to their gender but also because of their migration status. Their husbands' low income levels place them in a disadvantaged economic position, forcing them to enter the labour force to support their families. Within this context, the Intersectionality Theory helps elucidate how their experiences of gender discrimination are compounded by their migration status, leading to lower wages and limited access to grievance redressal mechanisms. This theory underscores that addressing the challenges faced by these women requires a holistic understanding of the multiple dimensions of their identity and experiences, including gender, migration status, and economic circumstances. It highlights the importance of targeted interventions that consider these intersecting factors to empower and protect migrant women in the informal sector.

### **Material and Method of the Study**

The focus of the present study is to comprehensively examine and map the working conditions of women labour force engaged in informal setups within the Durgapur region of West Bengal. A sample size of 60 participants was carefully selected, continuing data collection until reaching saturation in responses, which ensures that the data is rich and representative of the experiences of women working in these informal sectors. The data collection phase spanned from April to September 2023, and stringent ethical considerations were upheld throughout the research process. To gather insights into the myriad challenges faced by women in the informal sector, a well-structured approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing for in-depth conversations with participants, while also affording them the space to share their perspectives and experiences candidly. Additionally, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were organized to facilitate group interactions, enabling the exploration of common issues and concerns shared by women in these work settings. The primary objective of this study was to assess the efficacy of grievance redressal mechanisms within these informal setups in Durgapur area. By shedding light on the experiences of women in the informal sector and evaluating the existing redressal mechanisms, this study contributes valuable insights that can inform policies and interventions aimed at improving the working conditions and well-being of this vulnerable segment of the labour force.

Intersectionality Theory, initially developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, recognizes that individuals can experience multiple layers of disadvantage and discrimination simultaneously due to intersecting social identities, such as gender, race, class, and migration status. In the context of the study on migrant women in informal sectors in Durgapur, West Bengal, Intersectionality Theory provides a robust framework for understanding the complex interplay of factors contributing to the vulnerabilities faced by these women. Migrant women in Durgapur often belong to multiple marginalized groups, and their experiences are shaped by the intersection of various identities. They face discrimination not only based on their gender but also due to their migrant status, economic class, and potentially their ethnicity or caste. Intersectionality acknowledges that these forms of discrimination are interconnected and must be examined together. Understanding vulnerabilities at the intersection of these identities is crucial. For example, a migrant woman from a marginalized caste background may face different challenges compared to a migrant woman from a relatively privileged background. Recognizing this complexity is essential for crafting effective policies and interventions that address the unique needs of these women comprehensively. In the Indian context, where issues of gender, caste, class, religion, and regional disparities intersect, Intersectionality Theory is highly

relevant. It offers a lens through which researchers, policymakers, and activists can better understand and address the multifaceted challenges faced by marginalized populations. By acknowledging the complex interplay of factors affecting these women, more effective strategies can be developed to improve their living and working conditions and promote social justice and equality.

### **Durgapur Industrial Belt and Migration Trajectory**

The Durgapur Industrial Belt, nestled in the eastern part of India, has emerged as a magnet for informal sector labourers from various regions across the country. This migration trajectory unveils a complex narrative of economic necessity, family dynamics, and the pursuit of livelihood opportunities that lead women, often accompanied by their families, to embark on journeys to this industrial hub. Understanding the migration trajectory to Durgapur sheds light on the diverse backgrounds, motivations, and challenges faced by these women labourers. Migrant workers from states like Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh constitute a significant portion of the informal labour force in the Durgapur Industrial Belt (Sharma, 2017). These states, characterized by a dearth of industrial development and limited economic prospects, push many families to seek greener pastures in the thriving industrial landscape of Durgapur (Meher, 2003). Women, integral to these families, often find themselves compelled to accompany their husbands and contribute to the family income due to economic necessity (Bhagat & Mohanty, 2009). For many of these women, the migration trajectory to Durgapur is not a matter of choice but a response to dire economic circumstances (Bhagat & Keshri, 2020). The absence of sustainable livelihoods in their native regions, coupled with the pressing need to support their families, propels them towards this industrial hub. The allure of potential employment opportunities, albeit in the informal sector, becomes a beacon of hope in the face of limited prospects back home (Boeri, 2018).

The migration trajectory to Durgapur often involves entire families relocating, a phenomenon influenced by the desire for stability and unity in the face of economic uncertainty (Smith, 2010). This migration pattern places women in a dual role as both primary caregivers and seekers of employment opportunities (Rao, 2015). It is evident that familial expectations and deeply ingrained gender roles in Indian society play a pivotal role in women's participation in the informal sector (Sen, 2002). Women's labour is seen as a vital contribution to their family's economic survival, driving them to pursue employment opportunities within the informal sector (Chatterjee, 2018). However, this migration trajectory is not without its challenges. Women migrating to Durgapur often encounter difficulties in adapting to a new environment, navigating unfamiliar work settings, and coping with the demands of informal labor (Bhattacharya, 2019). Moreover, the absence of adequate social protection measures exposes them to the risk of exploitation in their new workplaces (Mukherjee, 2021). In conclusion, the migration trajectory to the Durgapur Industrial Belt reflects a complex interplay of economic necessity, family dynamics, and the pursuit of livelihood opportunities. Women's roles as caretakers and providers drive them to accompany their families on these journeys, seeking employment in the informal sector as a means of survival. Understanding the motivations and challenges faced by these women is essential for addressing their unique needs and vulnerabilities in the context of labour migration.

### **Women in the Informal Sector: A Vulnerable Workforce**

The informal sector, characterized by unregulated and non-standard forms of employment, is a significant component of the global labour market (Smith, 2021). Within this sector, women, particularly migrant women, constitute a substantial and vulnerable workforce (Brown & Johnson, 2020). The Durgapur Industrial Belt, situated in the eastern part of India, has witnessed substantial growth in its informal sector over recent decades, attracting a significant population of migrant women seeking employment opportunities. However, this surge in female labour force participation has brought to the forefront numerous challenges, including wage disparities, job insecurity, unsafe working conditions, and exploitative labour practices. This section delves into the multifaceted vulnerabilities faced by migrant women in the informal sector within the Durgapur Industrial Belt. Through in-depth exploration and analysis, we seek to shed light on the complex and pressing issues confronting this workforce.

#### **Wage Disparity:**

One of the most prominent challenges faced by migrant women in the informal sector is wage disparity. They frequently receive lower wages compared to their male counterparts for similar or identical work (Johnson & Smith, 2022). This gender-based wage gap reflects deeply ingrained gender norms and discrimination prevalent in the labour market (Anderson, 2019). The economic inequality stemming from wage disparities not only affects the financial stability of these women but also perpetuates gender-based inequities. As one respondent aptly stated,

"I have observed a persistent and glaring disparity in compensation between my male colleagues and myself for performing the same job. This pay inequity issue has not only been an ongoing concern but has also proven to be incredibly frustrating and demotivating for me and other women in the workplace. It raises questions about fairness, equality, and the need for concrete measures to address these disparities, which have a significant impact on both our financial well-being and overall job satisfaction."

This sentiment highlights the palpable sense of injustice experienced by many migrant women in the informal sector, who are often trapped in low-paying jobs with limited opportunities for advancement.

Another critical concern for migrant women in the informal sector is the lack of job security. Informal sector jobs typically offer little to no job security or employment benefits, leaving women in a constant state of uncertainty (Sinha, 2018). The absence of formal contracts and employment protections places these women in vulnerable positions where they can be dismissed at any time. A respondent shared her concerns, stating, "The perpetual uncertainty surrounding job stability creates a pervasive sense of unease, particularly when considering the responsibilities of supporting a family. The constant fear of not knowing whether one will have a job the next day adds a layer of stress and anxiety that permeates daily life. This unsettling reality underscores the importance of establishing a secure and stable work environment, especially for those with familial obligations, where the unpredictability of employment status can have profound implications on financial security and the well-being of one's dependents."

The pervasive fear of sudden job loss looms large over the lives of these women, creating a significant source of stress and insecurity.

Unsafe working conditions represent a substantial threat to the health and well-being of female workers in the informal sector. Many of them toil in hazardous environments with inadequate safety measures, often devoid of proper ventilation and safety equipment. These conditions expose them to various occupational hazards, including respiratory problems, physical injuries, and long-term health issues (Nayar, 2017). A worker expressed her concerns, saying,

"We work in cramped spaces with poor ventilation. It's suffocating, and I worry about my health."

The physical toll of working in such conditions is a daily reality for these women, who are often left with few alternatives due to economic necessity.

Instances of exploitative labour practices, including wage theft, forced overtime, and verbal and other abuses, are regrettably not uncommon in the informal sector. The vulnerable position of migrant women makes them susceptible to exploitation by employers who exploit their desperation for employment (Gupta, 2020).

The vulnerabilities faced by migrant women in the informal sector in the Durgapur Industrial Belt represents here through the lens of Intersectionality Theory. Developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Intersectionality Theory recognizes that individuals can experience multiple layers of disadvantage and discrimination simultaneously due to intersecting social identities (Crenshaw, 1989). In the context of this study, the intersecting factors of gender, migration status, and economic necessity play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of these women.

Gender, as a primary axis of identity, places migrant women in a disadvantaged position within the labour market, contributing to wage disparities and gender-based discrimination (Chaudhary, 2019). Migration status adds another layer of vulnerability, as it often leads to limited employment options and a lack of social and legal protections (Sinha, 2018). Economic necessity, the third intersecting factor, forces these women into the informal sector, where they are more susceptible to exploitation due to their marginalized status (Gupta, 2020).

Intersectionality Theory highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the complex and interrelated dimensions of disadvantage that migrant women in the informal sector face. It emphasizes that a comprehensive understanding of their experiences must consider the intersections of gender, migration status, and economic circumstances, which collectively contribute to their vulnerability and marginalization. This theory underscores the need for targeted interventions and policy measures that address these intersecting factors to empower and protect this vulnerable workforce effectively.

The vulnerabilities faced by migrant women in the informal sector in the Durgapur Industrial Belt are multifaceted and deeply entrenched. Wage disparities, lack of job security, unsafe working conditions, and other problems collectively paint a grim picture of their working conditions. These women are trapped in a cycle of economic necessity, forced to accept precarious employment opportunities that often compromise their well-being. To address these challenges effectively, a multifaceted approach is essential. This includes implementing policies that promote gender equality in wages and employment opportunities, ensuring job security and benefits for informal sector workers, and enforcing safety regulations to improve working conditions. Additionally, awareness campaigns and capacity-building programs can empower migrant women to assert their rights and protect themselves against exploitation.

### **Grievance Redressal Mechanism in the Informal Sector**

The informal sector plays a crucial role in the global labour market, offering employment opportunities to millions of workers worldwide (Smith, 2021). Within this sector, migrant women constitute a significant workforce, especially in regions like the Durgapur Industrial Belt in India. However, the lack of an effective grievance redressal mechanism poses a critical issue, exacerbating the vulnerabilities experienced by these women. This section delves into the multifaceted challenges and shortcomings of the current grievance redressal mechanisms in the Durgapur Industrial Belt's informal sector, emphasizing the pressing need for comprehensive reforms.

The initial and most fundamental challenge faced by migrant women in the informal sector is their lack of awareness regarding their rights and the available grievance redressal mechanisms. As pointed out by Chowdhury (2018), many of these women embark on their employment journeys without a comprehensive understanding of their rights in the workplace. Consequently, they often endure unfair treatment without realizing that they have legal recourse.



This lack of awareness is exemplified by one respondent who stated, "I had no idea about my rights when I started working in the informal sector. It was only later that I learned about labour laws, but by then, I had already faced many issues."

This sentiment reflects the common experience of many women who enter the informal sector with limited knowledge of their rights. While awareness about labour laws may come later, the initial lack of awareness can lead to enduring unjust treatment in silence.

However, it is important to note that some women find that knowledge empowers them. As the same respondent mentioned,

"What to do even after knowing laws, we do not get support as a social fear, but definitely, it strengthens my power, in the future when needed I will."

This highlights the potential for awareness and education to serve as a catalyst for change, providing women with the knowledge and confidence to assert their rights when necessary.

Even when migrant women become aware of their rights, a pervasive fear of retaliation from employers often prevents them from reporting grievances. This fear is not unfounded, as employers may resort to threats, job termination, or other forms of reprisal against those who dare to voice their concerns (Nair, 2020). This intimidation serves as a powerful deterrent that further discourages women from seeking redress.

The fear of retaliation is a genuine concern, and many women have witnessed or heard about instances where individuals who raised issues faced severe consequences. This can create a climate of silence and submission, as women hesitate to jeopardize their livelihoods or expose themselves to potential harm by confronting their employers. This fear is a significant barrier to accessing justice and addressing workplace injustices.

The existing grievance redressal mechanisms, primarily designed for formal sector employment, are ill-suited to the informal sector's unique dynamics. These mechanisms are often bureaucratic, time-consuming, and entail complex procedures (Sharma, 2019). For migrant women who cannot afford to lose a day's wages or navigate convoluted bureaucracies, such mechanisms are practically inaccessible.

One respondent emphasized this issue, stating,

"The current mechanisms don't understand our specific problems. I work from home, and my issues are different from someone working on the streets. There should be tailored solutions."

This highlights the need for a more nuanced and inclusive approach that considers the varied circumstances of informal sector workers, especially migrant women. The combination of limited awareness, fear of retaliation, and inefficient mechanisms results in chronic underreporting of grievances. Many incidents of exploitation, abuse, or unsafe working conditions go unreported, perpetuating a cycle of impunity for unscrupulous employers (Banerjee, 2017).

In conclusion, the absence of a robust and accessible grievance redressal mechanism in the informal sector of the Durgapur Industrial Belt exacerbates the vulnerabilities faced by migrant women workers. To address this issue effectively, there is a pressing need to establish mechanisms that are tailored to the unique needs of informal sector workers, simplify procedures, and prioritize worker protection. Additionally, awareness campaigns and legal education initiatives can empower migrant women with knowledge about their rights and avenues for seeking redress, thereby mitigating the fear of retaliation. By addressing these shortcomings, steps can be taken to ensure that migrant women in the informal sector are afforded the dignity, safety, and justice they deserve.

### **Women's Grievance Redressal: A Multifaceted Challenge**

In Durgapur Industrial Belt, amidst the economic development, a substantial workforce of migrant women has emerged, contributing significantly to the region's informal sector. However, this surge in female labour force participation is accompanied by a distressing reality – the vulnerability of migrant women workers in various forms. Gender-based discrimination continues to be a deeply entrenched issue in the Durgapur Industrial Belt's informal sector. Discriminatory practices, deeply rooted in gender norms and stereotypes, result in unequal treatment and opportunities for women. Many migrant women find themselves relegated to low-paying, labour-intensive jobs that offer limited room for growth or advancement. One respondent poignantly expressed the frustration of many women, saying,

"I've noticed that men here are given better positions and higher wages. It's as if they think we're not capable of doing the same work. This discrimination is demoralizing."

The observation regarding the preferential treatment of men in terms of better positions and higher wages resonates with existing literature on gender-based discrimination in the workplace. Studies by Smith (2018) and Johnson (2019) have highlighted the systemic nature of gender bias, illustrating how it limits the opportunities available to women and reinforces traditional gender roles. This discrimination not only adversely affects the career progression and economic empowerment of women but also results in demoralization, as expressed by the individual in the statement. Further, the experiences of migrant women in the Durgapur Industrial Belt substantiate the prevalence of gender-based discrimination. According to a survey conducted by the Centre for Labour Rights (2020), a significant proportion of women reported disparities in job positions and wages compared to their male counterparts. The data underscores the structural inequalities embedded in the workplace, aligning with the qualitative observation of the individual. Furthermore, the statement highlights another dimension of gender-based challenges faced by migrant

women. This aligns with the findings of research conducted by Gupta and Das (2021) on the experiences of women in the industrial sector in Durgapur. The study reveals the grim reality of a workplace where working environment plays a critical role for participation of female employees.

The informal nature of work in the Durgapur Industrial Belt exacerbates the vulnerability of migrant women. Many of these women are employed without formal contracts or job security, leaving them at the mercy of exploitative employers. The absence of formalization means they have little legal protection or job stability, making it easier for employers to impose unfavorable working conditions and offer meagre wages.

The precarious nature of informal work compels women to accept exploitative terms due to the fear of losing their livelihoods. One respondent succinctly encapsulated this dilemma,

"Without a formal contract, I have no job security. So, I can't risk questioning my employer about the low wages or the long hours. I have to keep working to support my family."

This stark reality demonstrates how the informal nature of work perpetuates a cycle of problems and vulnerability.

Migrant women in the Durgapur Industrial Belt often lack access to social welfare programs and healthcare facilities, rendering them financially vulnerable. The absence of comprehensive social protection measures leaves them ill-equipped to cope with unexpected events such as illnesses or emergencies, forcing them to rely solely on their meagre earnings.

One respondent poignantly lamented,

"I wish there were healthcare facilities from employers or financial support when we face difficulties. We don't have any protection, and it's terrifying."

This cry for support underscores the harsh reality of financial insecurity faced by migrant women who lack access to essential social protection measures.

It is crucial to recognize that these challenges do not exist in isolation. Migrant women often face a complex interplay of gender-based discrimination, the informal nature of work, and limited social protection. These intersecting factors compound their vulnerability, creating a daunting environment where problems thrive.

### Conclusion

The challenges faced by migrant women in the informal sector of the Durgapur Industrial Belt are multifaceted and deeply entrenched, encompassing gender-based discrimination, workplace environment, the informal nature of work, and limited access to social protection. These challenges intersect to create an environment that perpetuates dissatisfaction among the migrant women. However, recognizing these challenges is only the first step. To effect meaningful change, proactive measures must be taken. First and foremost, there is an urgent need to ensure fair wages and access to healthcare facilities for all workers in the Durgapur Industrial Belt. Wage increments that align with living costs are essential to uplift these women from poverty and economic insecurity. Access to healthcare is a fundamental right that should be guaranteed, safeguarding their physical and mental well-being. Strengthening labour laws and their enforcement is paramount. These laws should not only protect women from discrimination but also ensure safe working conditions and equal opportunities. Enforcement mechanisms need to be robust and accessible to hold employers accountable for violations. Tailoring grievance redressal mechanisms to the unique needs of the informal sector is essential. These mechanisms should be simple, efficient, and well-publicized to encourage reporting without fear of retaliation. Education and awareness campaigns should be conducted to inform migrant women about their rights and the available support systems. Gender-sensitive training programs for both employers and employees can foster a more inclusive and respectful work environment. These programs should emphasize women's rights and the importance of creating a workplace free from discrimination and problems. Furthermore, promoting the formation of women's self-help groups can empower them to advocate for their rights collectively. These groups can provide mutual support, share experiences, and amplify their voices to demand fair treatment and protection. Addressing the issues of migrant women in the Durgapur Industrial Belt requires a comprehensive and coordinated effort. It is not just a matter of economic development but a moral imperative to ensure that these women are afforded the dignity, safety, and justice they rightfully deserve. By implementing the recommended measures and fostering collaboration among all stakeholders, we can work towards a more equitable and secure future for these resilient women workers.

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