



---

## **WORKING CONDITIONS OF WOMEN WORKERS IN INFORMAL SECTOR: A CASE STUDY OF MALWA REGION OP PUNJAB**

**Dr. Neeru Garg**

Associate Prof.& Head, PG. Dept. of Commerce

SSD Girls' College, Bathinda

Punjab, India

### **Abstract**

*This paper summarizes the empirical results of the research study and discusses the implications emanating from the analysis. This paper's findings talk about the working conditions of the women workers and discrimination towards these workers at their workplace. It also discusses the various problems faced by the women workers such as period of unemployment in the last year, physical and verbal abuse faced by women workers, access of safe and hygienic sanitation and toilet facility at work place, working during menstruation and pregnancy, their health problems, forum to register their complaints, various social security welfare schemes for the women workers and their status of implementation and to what extent these social security welfare schemes are in reach to these women workers. It also highlights the suggestions for improving the living standards of the women workers through adult education and educating their children for better future etc. This study is a result of the primary data collected from the four district of the Malwa region of Punjab which includes Mansa, Bathinda, Firozpur and Sangrur. A total 600 respondents from the informal sector were questioned which included women workers from brick kiln industry, construction industry, wellness industry, service sector industry and women workers of small shops.*

**Keywords:** Working conditions, Hygienic, Informal, Discrimination, Exploitation

### **Introduction**

The informal sector which is also known as unorganised sector plays a major role in the development of a society in terms of indirect employment generation. It also determines the political mood of any nation as it significantly contribute to the nation building as a part of the economy and indirectly contribute to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in hidden form. Due to Globalisation the concepts of contract workers, casual workers and informal workers has emerged in the global economy market of workforce (Mishra, 2001). Now Informal workers are almost available in every part of the globe and country. India is also not an exception in this field of informal sector labour employment. The informal sector in India is large and includes every sector of the economy, including agriculture. In India, informal economy accounts for 87 percent of the total workforce in the country. Majority of the workers are either illiterate or drop outs from formal school system (Herschbach, 1989, Thakur and venkatraman, 2007). Lower level of education among the workers make them an easy access to the informal sector and denies their access to highly paid jobs in the organized sector and also limits them to mostly casual manual jobs with less chances for a decent employment with fair wages and working conditions (NCEUS, 2007 and ILO, 2002). In India this sector has established itself

to be the only source of survival of a large segment, female work force in particular. An increasingly large portion of women has been absorbed by this sector and importance of unorganised sector for its role in absorbing the women workers is undeniable.

If we talk about Punjab, Most of employment in agriculture and outside agriculture is primarily in the form of informal employment. In Punjab, taking all sectors together, as per the latest NSSO survey, about 95.8 per cent of total workers in the rural areas and 82.1 percent workers in urban areas are informal workers (NSSO, 2011). This shows the extent and importance of the informal sector. Also after green revolution, Punjab became more developed agricultural state and as a result labour force from across the country started migrating in the state for employment in informal sector such as agriculture and construction. As per Census 2011, Punjab has a population of around 27.7 million. Females constitute 47.23percent of total population of the state and constitute the largest segment of India's informal sector workforce. As far as industries in informal sectors are concerned, in the state of Punjab 600,000 workers are in brick kilns out of which about half are women, who are not included in the kiln's records and are considered "invisible," female brick-kiln layers. The rights and conditions of these women working in the brick kilns is especially alarming. Many of the workers travel from other states in India to come work in the kilns. Living nearby, they have little access to proper food or nutrition, and lack of access to healthcare and medical facilities. Many of the women workers are sexually abused and condition for pregnant women are particularly bad as they do not have access to medical facilities and are forced to work during their pregnancy. After decades of below minimum wage, debt bondage, abuses of human rights and sexual harassment in the brick-kiln industry, women labourers are now demanding change. Same condition is with Construction industry in Punjab which employs large number of skilled, semiskilled as well as unskilled workforce due to its huge demand for sundry and manual work. The women workforce employed in the construction industry has to face serious problems related to their work environment, viz., wage discrimination, gender and sexual harassment, lower wages, health hazards, safety issues. Despite these problems, construction industry attracts female workers. Their skills are never upgraded to major skilled jobs in the construction industry like, mason, bar benders, carpenter, plumber, fabricator or painter etc as they are allowed to perform only certain types of work and usually they assist the male work force. These women also need some change in their pitiable condition.

In spite of these, women are also involved in making pottery, as household maid, working in small shops, tailor shops and working as vendors, where their contribution is significant but in hidden form. Women workers are facing the same type of problems as they were facing in brick kiln or construction industries like deprivation of social security benefits. So this paper emphasizes on the poor working conditions of the women workers employed in the sectors of brick kiln, pottery, construction sector, small shops, tailor shops and beauty parlours in the region of Bathinda, Sangrur, Firozpur and Mansa and also evaluate the implementation of various schemes formulated by the government to enhance the socio-economic and working conditions of these women workers.

### **I. Literature Review:**

A number of studies have been done in this area of informal sector and some of them are summarized below:

**Saran (1990)** made an attempt to study the problems of unorganised sector women workforce covering brick kilns, quarries and mines of Bihar and West Bengal. It was found that these women workers were exploited by paying low wages. They had to work for longer hours of work i.e 14 to16 hours for migrant workers and about 10 hours for the local. Most of these workforce was illiterate, indebted and belonged to scheduled caste, scheduled tribes and backward classes. Cheating, threatening, beating and sexual abuses were some of the common problems faced by these women workers at their work place.

**Sultania (1994)** tried to study the women workers engaged as contract labourers at micro level in major parts of Jaipur city. The major emphasis of this study was based on the reasons for inequality of women as contract workers along with its impact. It also dealt with the characteristics, profile and recruitment process of these contract workers. The main findings of this study were that the women in unorganised sector generally experience sexual and socio economic exploitation. Most of them are illiterate, earning lesser wages, subject to male dominance, work for longer hours a day with no medical or leave facility.

**Deshpande (1996)** attempted to study the unfavourable conditions of women workers in the informal sectors. As per this study the main characteristics of women workers in this sector are ignorance, lack of education, lack of skills, seasonal employment, heavy physical work, long hours of work, lesser wage payments, sex discrimination in wage structure etc.. Despite all these negative characteristics the women search for the jobs for their livelihood.

**Jhabvala (1998)** in her study put thrust on the need for social security for the women workers. She tried to find the mechanism for social security provisions, insurance, social security funds for the women workers in the unorganised sector. There should be inbuilt social and financial security for the workers of unorganised sectors.

**Choudhury (2002)** made an attempt to study the women workers in brick kiln industries in Guwahati city. The construction and brick kiln workers used to enjoy the nominal benefits depending on the generosity of their employers. In most of the cases they work as casual workers and no work no pay rule is applicable to them.

**ILO (2003)** as per ILO study, the significant changes in the world economy such as globalisation, rapid technology progress and increasing informalisation of work has changed the status of women in the labour market. These changes have provided new opportunities for economic growth in the world and national economies. They have also generated major challenges which include meeting the greater demand for skilled jobs and maintaining the employability of a major portion of national labour force.

**Krishna Bhowmick (2006)** felt that the actual worker participants in the informal sector have always been pushed to 'subordinate positions', and have been made 'invisible'. Policy option has always overlooked their existence. They have always been considered as a reservoir of cheap labour available for exploitation. When we come to realities, bulk of the third world poor are women workers living in sub-human conditions of starvation and squalor. It is a recurring story of incomplete human existence for the female poor in all developing countries due to powerlessness.

**Ghoshal, (2008)** studied the problems and prospect of brick industry in Tripura. Ghoshal studied different aspects of the product and productivity of brick industry by calculating the overall productivity, labour productivity, and intensity of the factors of productions. For analysing the viability of the industry in Tripura, he measured the production function, supply

and demand function, and cost functions and price model. This study led emphasis mainly on the financial aspect of the industry with different financial tools like Ratio analysis, CVP analysis. With the use of these financial analysis technique, he found that this is a profit making industry and occupies a major place in the economy of Tripura with respect to income and employment generation.

**Denial (2009)** studied the economic conditions of Migrant Brick- kiln workers who are semi-skilled in Orissa. He found that such workers are mostly exploited, un-organized and un-regulated labour force in India and living in harsh conditions.

**Mahalakshmi (2012)** discussed about the socio economic status of women employees in tea industries. The study has focused on living conditions, wages, earnings and social security benefits. It also highlights the important factors for their development and the problems faced by the employees.

**Mohapatra(2012)** The present study aims at understanding the degree of vulnerability of the women workers in informal sector in India. For this purpose, to find out the realities, a small study has been conducted in the State of Odisha. Results revealed that a high percentage of occupational group irrespective of their monthly average income, continue to face multiple constraints which compel them to live a life full of compromises. This study also highlights that organizing women workers in the informal economy could have beneficial impact on their work and life if such organization helps them to obtain credit and other facilities.

**Rathod( 2012)**This study measures the status of urban families who are living below poverty line in Imphal city and their socio economic status. The socio economic is an important determinant of the livelihoods as it influences levels of knowledge, skill and income conditions which mean for the living.

**Gadapani (2013)** tried to study the socio economic conditions of tea community and various benefits to which they were deprived of. Some factors which lead to low socio economic conditions are low wages, lack of job opportunities and poor work culture at work place.

## **II. Objectives of Study:**

The objective of the present study is:.

- To examine the working and living conditions of these women workers.
- To analyze the discrimination towards the women workers at their workplace.
- To identify the other various problems faced by these women workers at their workplace.
- To provide suggestions based on the findings of the study for improving their life.

## **III. Research Methodology:**

The present study is primarily based on field data. Random sampling was used to choose the sample of 600 women workers engaged in informal activities from four main districts of Malwa region of Punjab based on women workforce participation rate. Data has been collected with the help of a questionnaire which was designed as per the objectives of the study to get the desired results. After the finalization of the questionnaire, a pilot survey of fifty respondents were carried out to check the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. The reliability test was conducted of fifty sample size with the help of SPSS 16.0. The Cronbach alpha of the pilot sample size was found to be 0.618 which was acceptable for the primary data

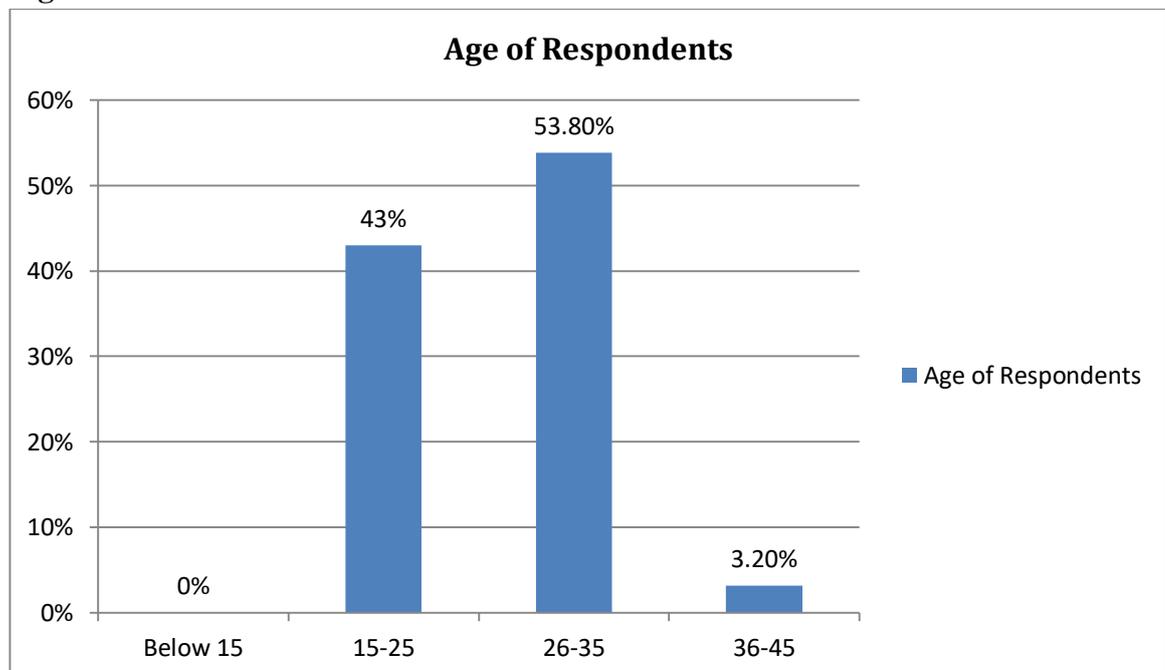
(Cronbach, 1951). The validated questionnaire was then filled with the 600 respondents from the various districts of Malwa region of the Punjab. All districts have been divided on the basis of women workforce participation rate and then further classified on the basis of highest workforce participation of women, middle participation rate then lowest participation rate. In highest women workforce participation Mansa district comes on first place, in middle workforce participation rate Bathinda and Ferozpur has been taken and in lowest participation rate Sangrur has been taken. The data was collected from the brick kiln women workers, small shops women workers, wellness industry workers, construction workers, service sector women workers and vendors who worked under the ownership of small shop owners. The sample of 600 women workers was divided on the basis of percentage of population of all districts selected for study. In Ferozpur, data was collected from 210 respondents and from Sangrur 168, in Bathinda district the sample size was 144 and in Mansa 78. The collected data was arranged as per the research design in the Microsoft Excel sheet and was analysed with the help of SPSS 16.0.

**IV. Findings And Discussions:**

**Age & Education of the Respondents**

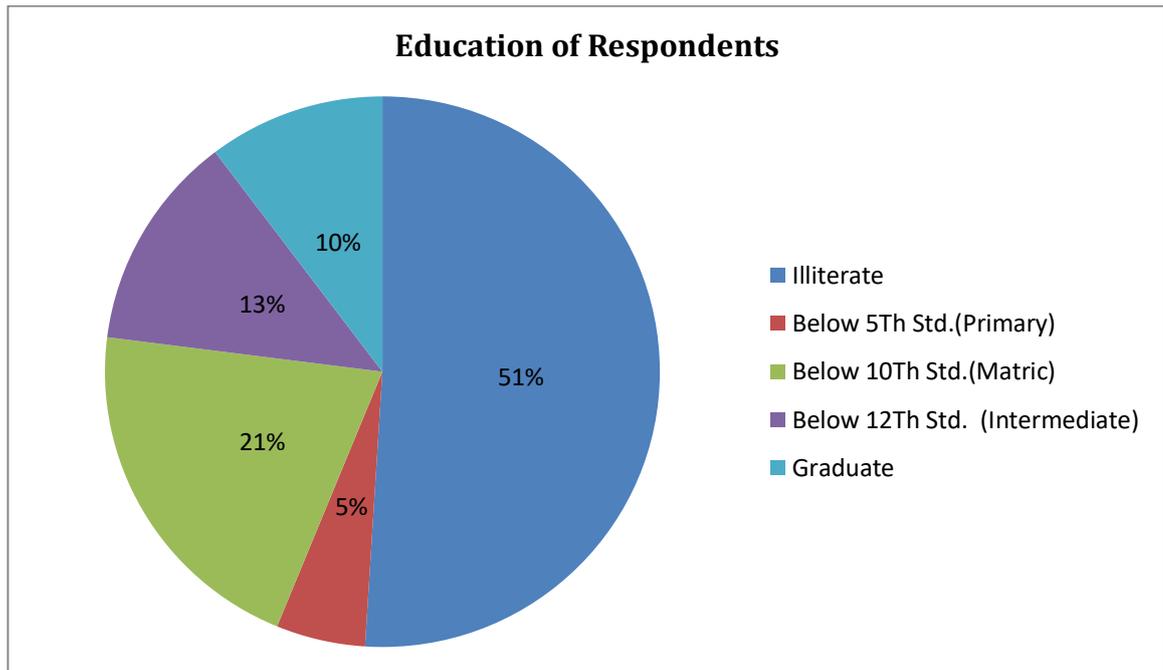
Age of the respondents is an important demographic variable that determines an individual's physical and mental maturity. It also determines whether one is economically active or dependent upon others. In this paper as per **Figure no 1**, the classification of the respondents according to age has been studied. Out of the total respondents, 43 percent were from the age group of 15-25 years, 53.8 percent were in the age group of 26-35 years and 3.2 percent were in the age group of 36-45 years. None were in the age group of below 15, 46-55 and above 55.

**Figure: 1**



Source: Field survey year 2018

Figure 2

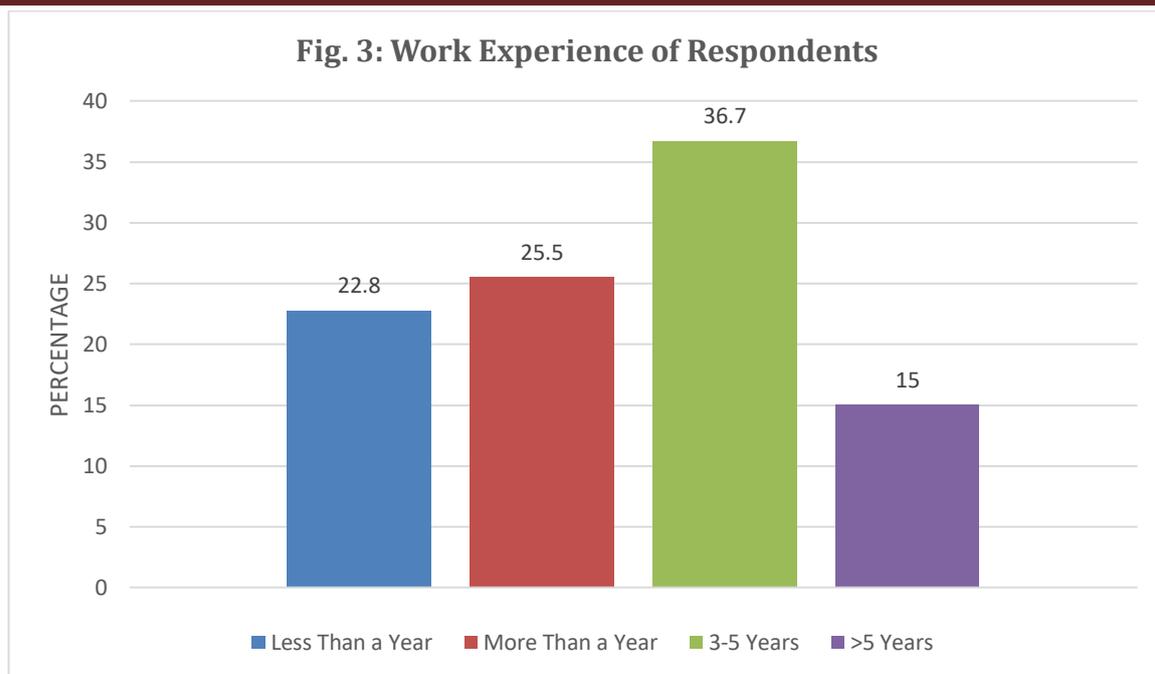


Source: Field survey year 2018

Education also plays an important role to get productive and remunerative employment. In Punjab, the percentage of women workers in informal sector with formal education is very low. The results reveal that as per **table 1**, out of the total respondents under study, 51 percent of the women workers were illiterate, 5.2 percent of the women workers were primary school level educated, 20.8 percent of the women workers were matric level educated, 12.7 percent of women workers were below 12<sup>th</sup> standard and 10.3 percent of the women were graduate. The education wise distribution shows that a majority of informal workers are illiterate or literate up to primary only. A small proportion of informal workers have attained education up to graduation level. So this shows that workers educational level is very less and so they are forced to accept this type of work.

### Work Experience of the Respondents

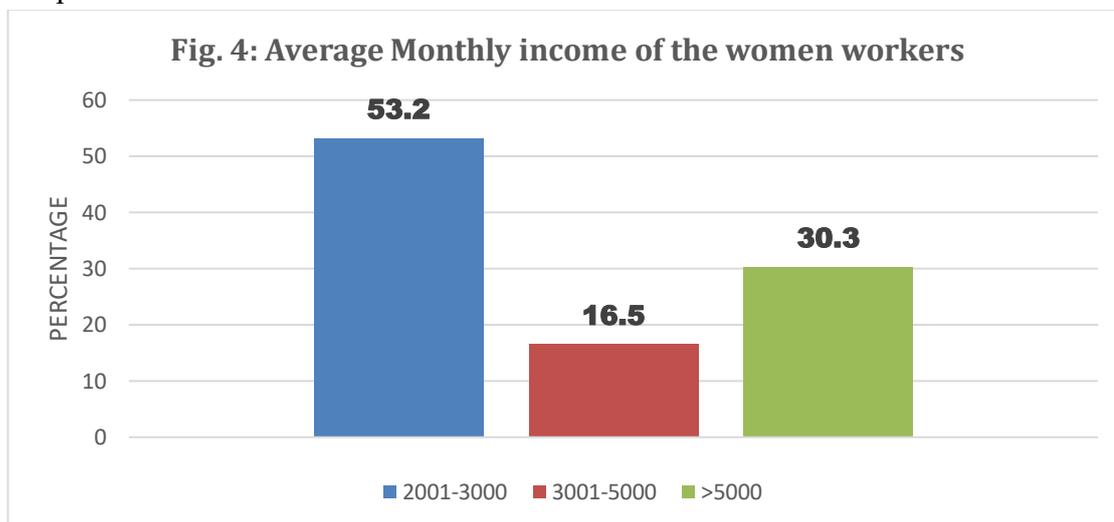
Out of the total respondents 22.83 percent of the women workers were working since less than a year. 25.50 percent of the respondents were working for more than a year, 36.67 percent were working for since 3-5 years and 15.0 percent of the respondents were working for more than 5 years.



Source: Field survey year 2018

### Average Monthly Income

Average monthly income is important because it decides the background of a person. Poverty line and standard of living of a person are measured by using the income as the prime indicator. Net income is a direct contributor to what a single person or family can afford to spend. People living closer to the poverty line may forego one necessity for another. The Fig. 2 indicates that the women workers earned a monthly salary between ₹ 2000 to more than ₹ 5000. 53.2 percent earned between ₹ 2001- ₹ 3000, 16.5 percent earned between ₹ 3001- ₹ 5000. 30.3 percent earned more than ₹ 5000/-.



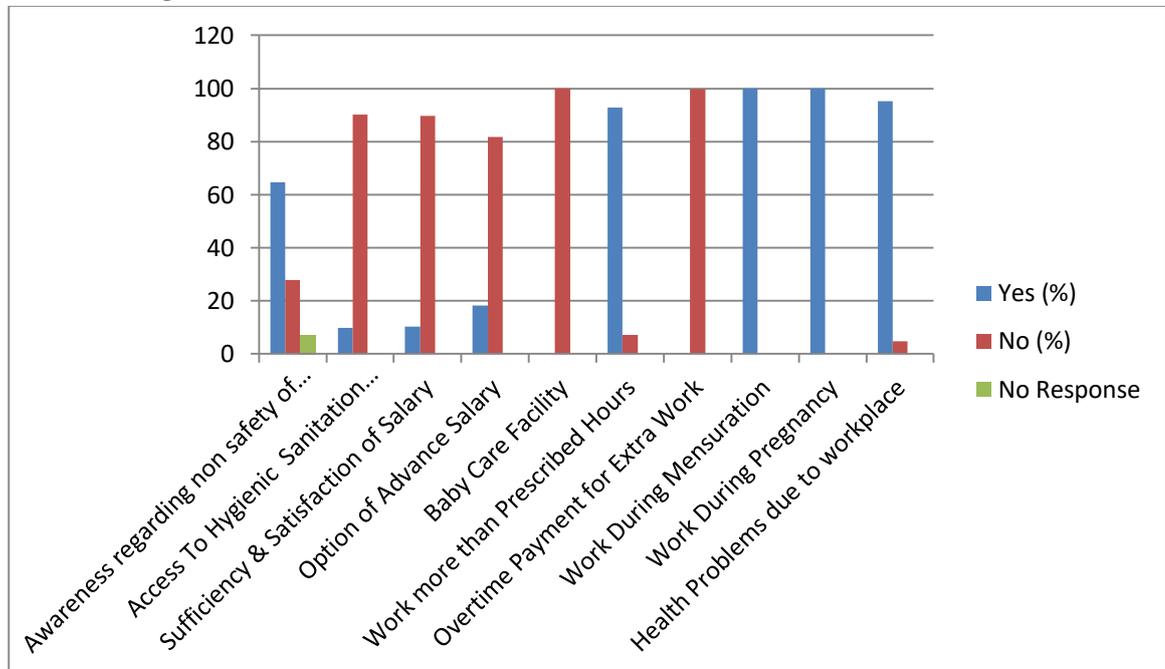
Source: Field survey year 2018

### Working Conditions of Women Workers

Workplace environment plays a major role in the performance and productivity of an employee. An unsafe environment such as poorly designed workplace, lack of ventilation, excessive noise, inappropriate lighting, poor supervisor support, poor work space, poor communication, and poor fire safety measures for emergencies can adversely affect the

productivity and health of the employee. In this study as depicted by **table 2**, out of the total respondents 64.8 percent agreed that they were aware that water provided to them was not safe and 90.2 percent employees were not having access to hygienic sanitation facility. Moreover 89.7 percent of women were not satisfied with their salary and in case of need they were also not given and advance salary option.

**Figure: 5: Working conditions of Women Workers**



Source: Field survey year 2018

Maternity benefits and child care services are an important part of social protection systems. This is particularly important for women workers who are more responsible for child care and domestic work than men. But it is very difficult for women workers to work with small child without any support at work place. It has also been depicted in the above table that baby care facilities was not being provided at the workplace of the women workers. 92.83 percent women workers work more than the prescribed hours. Out of which only 0.2 percent of the women workers who worked more than the prescribed hours being paid overtime while 99.8 percent of them were not paid for their overtime work. Although Menstruation is a natural biological process, not a disease or a disability yet it can be a slightly discomforting experience for women workers. Some women workers feel severe pain during this period and needs rest which is not possible for informal workers due to strict rules framed by the employers themselves. In this study also all the women workers confirmed to have worked during the period of mensuration. Women workers have to work during their period of pregnancy also.

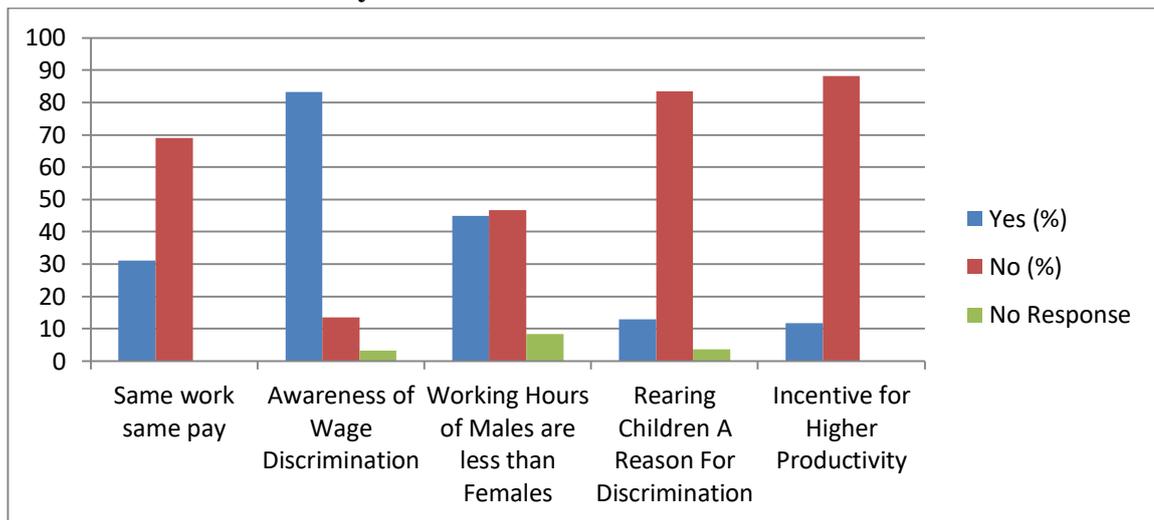
Health is one of the important indicators and the status of an Indian woman's health is intrinsically related to work place conditions which affects all aspects of her life. The circumstances in which many women work are pathetic and there is no' importance given to hygiene which leads them towards serious health diseases. In this study 95.3 percent women notified that they were having health problem due to poor working environment.

**Discrimination faced by Women Workers:**

The women workers do not have a choice to work, or not to work, due to dire need of income. The limited opportunities available to women are mostly low paid, lowstatus jobs in

the informal sector; jobs which do not have any possibilities of betterment, advancement of efficiency or training, to enable them to enter better jobs at a later stage. In the overall state of unemployment and lack of opportunities, women hold a secondary place to men in the race of employment. When they work for themselves, their wages and work is quite comparable with those of male workers (For example in case of vendors). In this study, 69 percent of the women workers were not provided with same work same pay facilities while 31 percent of the women workers were of the view that they are provided with the same work same pay.

**Figure 6: Discrimination faced by Women**



Source: Field survey year 2018

83.33 percent of the women workers said that they were aware of the wage discrimination at the work place while 13.47 percent were not aware of the wage discrimination at the work place. 3.20 percent of the women workers did not register their answer about the wage discrimination at the work place.

Informal employment is a larger source of employment for women than for men, and within the informal economy, women tend to be clustered in the most precarious and poorly remunerated forms of informal work. In every society, women tend to spend far more hours in unpaid work than men do. In this study as depicted in table 3, 45 percent of the female workers said that they work for longer hours than male workers while 46.67 percent said they work equally same as the male workers. 8.33 percent did not wished any answer.

13 percent of the women workers felt that rearing children was a reason for discrimination among women workers while 83.4 percent felt that this was not the reason for discrimination. 3.6 percent did not register their response for the same.

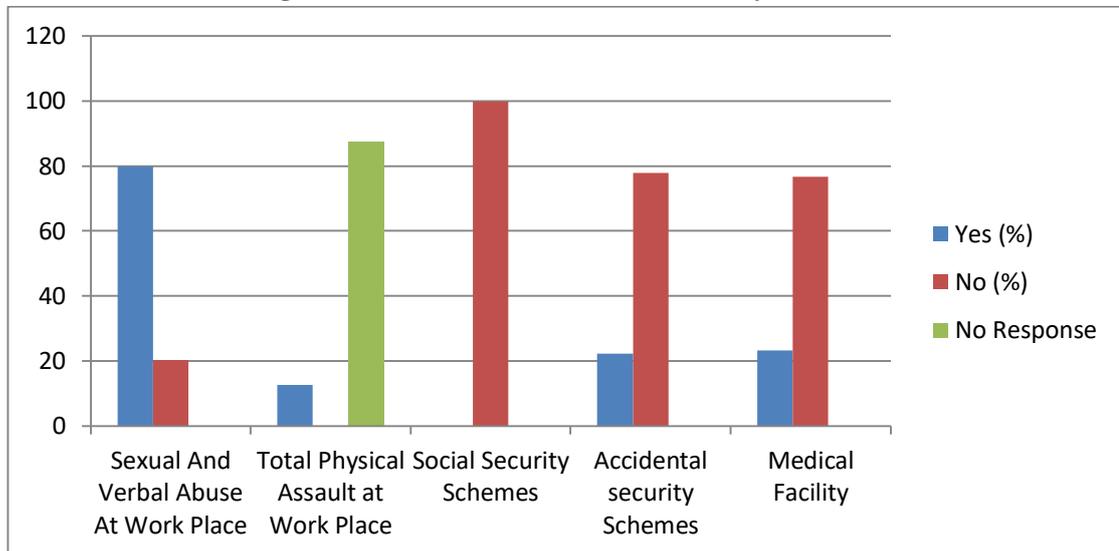
A primary purpose of an incentive scheme is to encourage greater productivity from individuals and work groups. In addition to motivating employees to increase their level of productivity, incentive schemes may reduce labour turnover among good performers or productive workers. In this study, it has been shown that 11.83 percent of the women workers received incentive for higher productivity during the period of study while 88.17 percent said that they did not receive any incentive for the higher productivity.

**Different Problems faced by Women:**

. If we talk about the violence and harassment experienced by informal workers it has been interpreted that 20.2 percent of the women workers denied being the victim of the sexual

and verbal abuse at their workplace while 79.8 percent complained about the sexual and verbal abuse at their workplace. As far as their social security was concerned they were not covered under any social security schemes of either Punjab govt. or Govt. Of India.

**Figure 7: Different Problems faced by Women**



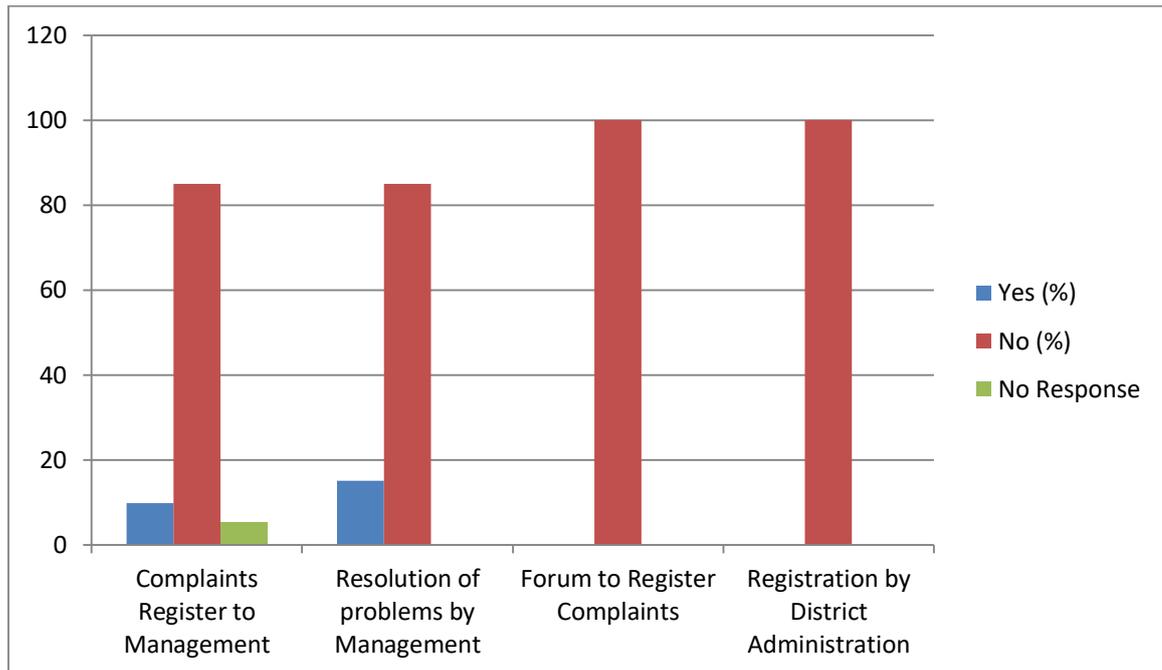
Source: Field survey year 2018

In this study also as **depicted by table 4**, none of the respondents under study were registered in either Atal Pension Scheme or New Pension Scheme. Only 22.2 percent workers were registered in the accidental security schemes and 23.3 percent were registered in the medical scheme at the workplace while these women workers have to face many injuries which occurs every day. In construction sites while climbing great heights carrying heavy loads, falling from heights, electric shock and collapse of ladder are the major reasons for fatal accidents. Workers in the brick-kiln industry suffer from respiratory problems arising from living and working twenty four hours of the day in the fumes emanating from the furnace which leads to persistent cough, body ache and exhaustion. Since there is no medical facility provided by the employers, the labours have to forego their work as well as wages for the day.

**Resolution of Problems of Women workers**

Though sexual harassment at the workplace has assumed serious proportions, women do not report the matter to the concerned authorities in most cases due to fear of reprisal from the harasser, losing one’s livelihood, being stigmatized and personal reputation. It involves serious health, human, economic and social costs, which manifests themselves in the overall development of a nation. In this study also as shown in **table 5**, 85 percent of the women workers did not had the liberty to talk to the management about their problems while 9.83 percent could talk to their management about their problems. 5.2 percent of respondents gave no response. Out of which most of the problems were not resolved by the management.

**Figure 8: Resolution of Problems of Women workers**



Source: Field survey year 2018

As shown in the above table, none of the women workers had a forum to register their complaints and were not registered by the district administration. While today, all workplaces in India are mandated by law to provide a safe and secure working environment, free from sexual harassment for all women but if we talk about informal sector women workers the situation is quite different.

**V. Suggestions and Policy Implications:**

The informal sector women workers contribute a lot to the main stream economy but are deprived from the basic infrastructure of the society. The district administration should register all these women workers in the district under the unorganised workers social security Act, 2008 and they should be provided the social security schemes provided by the Govt. to improve their living standards. Their employers should be forced to pay the salary and wages in the workers Jan dhan bank account. They should have a forum to register their complaints and their redressal mechanism system should be developed at the district level. The workers of informal sector should be provided with Atal pension scheme or new pension scheme or any other similar scheme of Govt. of India or Punjab Govt. There should be an advisory by the district administration to enroll the wards of informal sector workers in the nearby schools so that the children can educate themselves. The women workers should be paid extra money for overtime work and should not be allowed to work during mensuration period or during pregnancy. They and their families should be provided free health care in the Public Health Center in the district or in the district hospital. An emergency medical services should also be provided to the workers of the informal sector at their working place. They should be provided with safe drinking water at their workplace and hygienic toilet facilities be made available to them. They should have full liberty to talk to their management regarding their problems.

## **VI. Conclusion:**

To sum up, it can be concluded that although the opportunities in the informal sector economy are increasing in Punjab yet most of the workers are casual labour and flip side of the coin is that this sector also faces very serious problems relating to the employment of informal women workers. One problem is the painful slow pace of improvement in overall employment conditions of the informal sector workers despite a rapid economic growth of the country. The women workers are victims of ceaseless social oppression and economic exploitation. Their work remains unrecognised and their employment is often unprotected. Most of the labour laws either do not apply to them or are not implemented, and when laws exist, they are so riddled with loopholes as to invite rampant evasion. Social security is a major concern for the unorganised sector women workers. Women workers in this sector are not covered by social insurance, provident fund, maternity benefits etc. Whatever little they earn is spent on paying for expensive health services. So their problems should be solved at priority because if these are properly nurtured it can expand and develop optimally and can play an important role in the process of economic development.

## **Acknowledgement**

The present research paper is based on the project titled “Invisible Workers, Visible Contribution: A Case Study of Informal Sector Women Workers in Malwa Region of Punjab” Which was funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi. However, the responsibility for the facts stated, opinions expressed, and conclusions reached is entirely that of mine and not of the Indian Council of Social Science Research. Author is also heartily grateful to all participants in the survey for their coordination, suggestions and comments during the entire survey.

## **References**

- Choudhury, J.D. Paul (2002). Women Workers in Informal Sectors and Their Qualitative Contribution in Human Capital- A Micro Study on Greater Guwahati, Ph.D. Thesis, Gauhati University.
- Cronbach, L. J. (1951). Coefficient alpha and the internal structure of tests. *Psychometrika*, 16, 297-334 (28,307 citations in Google Scholar as of 4/1/2016).
- Daniel, U. (2009). The brick-Kiln industry and Orissa migrants. *TheHindu*, July 9, 2009.
- Despandey, Sudha (1996). Changing Structure of Employment in India. *The Indian Journal Economics*, 39( 4):
- Ghoshal, P K (2008). Prospect and Problems of Brick Industry, New Delhi. Mittal Publication, New Delhi.
- Herschbach, R. Dennis (1989). Training and the Urban Informal Sector: Some Issues and Approaches in Fluitman, Fred (ed.), *Training for Work in the Informal Sector*, International Labour Organization, Geneva.
- ILO (2002a). Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture, International Labour Organization, Geneva.
- ILO (2003). Social Security Issues, Challenges and Prospects, International Labour Conference, 89th Session Report VI, ILO, Geneva.

- Jhabvala, Renana (1998). Social Security for Unorganised Sector. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33( 22):
- Krishna Bhowmick. (2006). Employment Status of Women in Informal Sector. Indian Women (ed) Mittal Publications, New Delhi.
- Mahalakshmi.A (2012). A study on the socio-economic status of women employees in tea plantation industries. *International journal of Science, Engineering and Technology Research (IJSETR)*, 1(6):
- Mishra Lakshmidhar (2001). Can Globalization and Labour Rights co-exist? *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 44(1):
- Mohapatra Kamala Kanta(2012). Women Workers in Informal Sector in India: Understanding the Occupational Vulnerability *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2 (21): November 2012
- NCEUS (2007). Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector, National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, Government of India, New Delhi.
- Rathod G.R. et.al (2012). Measuring the Socio-economic status of urban below poverty line families in Imphal city, Manipur: A livelihood study. *International journal of marketing, Financial services & Management Research*. 1(12), Dec. 2012, ISSN: 22773622.
- Saran, A. B. and Sandhwar, A. N. (1990). Problems of Women Workers in Unorganised Sector (Brick Kilns, Quarries and Mines of Bihar and West Bengal), Northern Book Centre, New Delhi.
- Sharma, Gadapani (2013). A Case study on Socio-economic conditions of Tea Garden Labourers- Lohpohia Tea Estate of Jorhat District, Assam. *A journal of Humanities & Social Science*, I(III): January 2013.
- Sultania, Madhu (1994). Women: Contract Labourers; A deprivation Syndrome, Classic Publishing House, Jaipur.
- Thakur, C. P. and Venkataratnam, C. S. (2007). Conditions of Work in the Unorganised Sector in India. *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 50 (4): 749-764.

[www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org)

[www.labour.nic.in](http://www.labour.nic.in)

[www.workingwomensforum.org](http://www.workingwomensforum.org)