

Women's Labour Policy in Chhattisgarh: Impact, Challenges and Future Directions – A Sociological Study

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ABSTRACT

Women's labour participation in Chhattisgarh represents a historically rooted and socially shaped phenomenon. Unlike many other Indian states, Chhattisgarh's tribal, agrarian and forest-based socio-cultural systems have enabled women to participate in productive activities for centuries. However, the contemporary labour landscape of the state reveals a complex interplay of structural inequalities, industrial transitions, informal labour practices, state policies, and gendered socio-cultural norms. This research paper presents a sociological analysis of Chhattisgarh's Women's Labour Policy, examining its evolution, implementation, impact and limitations. Using feminist sociology, labour process theory and institutional analysis as theoretical foundations, the study critically discusses how the policy influences women's work conditions, wage structures, occupational health, mobility, skill development opportunities and social empowerment. The findings show that although the policy framework is progressive in intent, its outcomes remain uneven due to enforcement gaps, informalisation of labour markets, patriarchal cultural patterns and inadequate institutional capacity. The paper argues that effective realisation of gender-just labour systems in Chhattisgarh requires a multidimensional, evidence-based, intersectional and future-oriented approach that aligns with the socio-economic realities of rural, tribal and industrial regions of the state.

Keywords: Women's Labour Policy, Chhattisgarh, Feminist Sociology, Informal Labour Market, Gender Inequality, Industrial Labour,

Introduction

The condition of women workers in developing societies has long been an important subject of sociological inquiry. In India, the labour force participation of women is deeply influenced by structural inequalities relating to caste, patriarchy, class hierarchies, economic transitions and institutional limitations. Chhattisgarh, carved out in 2000, is a unique state in this context. Nearly one-third of its population belongs to Scheduled Tribes, and women in tribal communities have historically enjoyed greater mobility, social freedom and economic participation compared to many patriarchal regions of India. Yet, with the growth of industries, market-oriented employment systems, informal production networks and shifts in livelihood patterns, the character of women's labour in the state has undergone a significant transformation.

Women's Labour Policy in Chhattisgarh attempts to address the emerging issues of wage discrimination, occupational vulnerability, skill deprivation, sexual harassment, and lack of social security. The policy draws inspiration from national legislations such as the Equal Remuneration Act, Maternity Benefit Act, POSH Act and Minimum Wages Act, but seeks to contextualise these within the local socio-economic and cultural realities of the state. The policy also aims to connect women's labour with broader state strategies such as industrialisation, self-help group strengthening, rural livelihood missions and entrepreneurship promotion.

However, policy intent alone cannot dissolve deeply embedded inequalities. The lived realities of women workers in agriculture, construction, mining, brick-kilns, steel plants, textile units and forest-based occupations show that labour reforms have not proportionately translated into labour empowerment. The persistence of informalisation, contract labour systems, limited unionisation, gendered job segregation, and cultural constraints continue to affect women's labour participation and mobility. In this background, a sociological evaluation is essential to understand whether the Women's

Labour Policy of Chhattisgarh is adequately addressing the needs of women workers or merely functioning as a symbolic state document.

This research paper adopts a sociological perspective to examine the historical context, structural challenges, policy implementation patterns and future prospects of women's labour in Chhattisgarh. The study is grounded in feminist theories of patriarchy and gendered work, labour process theory that explains the control and exploitation inherent in capitalist labour structures, and institutional sociology that analyses how state mechanisms, industries and informal networks shape labour outcomes. The paper argues that labour reforms cannot succeed without addressing structural power relations, cultural norms and enforcement deficits. A labour policy is meaningful only when the political will, administrative capacity and social consciousness collectively support it.

Evolution of Women's Labour in Chhattisgarh: A Sociological Context

Any analysis of labour policy must begin with an understanding of the historical and cultural background of women's work in Chhattisgarh. The region has always reflected a unique socio-economic pattern distinguished by the coexistence of tribal, agrarian and forest-based livelihoods. Among tribal communities such as Gonds, Oraons, Halbas and Kamars, women traditionally held an active role in agriculture, hunting-gathering, forestry and artisanal tasks. Their labour contributions were not only economically essential but also socially respected. This relatively egalitarian tribal ethos stands in contrast to upper-caste Hindu social structures dominated by strict gender norms and restrictions.

With the integration of Chhattisgarh into the national industrial economy, especially the establishment of steel plants, coal mines, thermal power stations and cement factories, the nature of labour participation began to shift. Industrial employment remained largely male-dominated and technically oriented, leaving women confined to ancillary, low-paid or informal jobs. The contractualisation of labour further deepened gendered inequality, as contract workers—particularly women—were excluded from social security benefits, health protection and decent working conditions.

Agriculture, which employs a large share of women, also witnessed transformations. Mechanisation reduced women's engagement in certain activities, while seasonal unemployment increased their vulnerability. In urban centres such as Raipur, Bilaspur and Korba, the spread of malls, hospitality services, beauty industries, tele-calling centres and gig platforms created new opportunities for women. Yet, these emerging sectors brought their own risks: long working hours, low wages, job insecurity and exposure to harassment.

Thus, women's labour in Chhattisgarh presently stands at a juncture where traditional strengths coexist with modern vulnerabilities. The state's Women's Labour Policy attempts to synchronise this complex reality by addressing gender gaps across occupational sectors. But to understand its effectiveness, it is essential to explore the theoretical foundations that frame women's labour discourse.

Theoretical Framework

1. Feminist Sociological Perspective

Feminist scholars highlight that women's labour is shaped not merely by economic variables but by gendered power relations embedded in culture, family, religion and institutions. Patriarchy influences job access, wage negotiations, mobility, safety and household responsibilities. In Chhattisgarh, patriarchal norms vary across regions—tribal belts show more egalitarianism, while urban and semi-urban areas often reflect stricter gender boundaries.

2. Labour Process Theory

Braverman's labour process theory explains how capitalist production structures systematically deskill workers, increase managerial control and promote exploitative practices. In Chhattisgarh's industries, contract labour systems reflect these tendencies. Women workers often perform monotonous, low-paid tasks with minimal autonomy. Their lack of bargaining power deepens their vulnerability.

3. Institutional Sociology

Institutionalists argue that outcomes depend on the behaviour of state agencies, industries, informal networks and community norms. Even the best labour policies fail if enforcement agencies are weak or industries circumvent regulations. In Chhattisgarh, enforcement challenges are significant due to limited inspectors, informal labour dominance and weak grievance-redressal mechanisms.

These three theoretical dimensions collectively explain why labour policies may not automatically translate into empowerment for women workers.

Women's Labour Policy in Chhattisgarh: Structure, Objectives and Provisions

The Women's Labour Policy of Chhattisgarh integrates national legislations with state-specific interventions. It emphasises gender-sensitive industrial growth, safe workplaces, equal wages, social security, health welfare, and opportunities for skill development and entrepreneurship.

The policy includes provisions for maternity benefits, implementation of the POSH Act, livelihood support through State Rural Livelihood Mission, incentives for women-led enterprises, priority in microfinance, workplace safety regulations in factories and mines, and mandatory creche facilities in establishments with large numbers of female workers.

While the policy framework appears comprehensive, its translation into reality depends on sector-wise dynamics, employer compliance, institutional capacity and socio-cultural acceptance. Hence, the study shifts toward the empirical experiences of women workers across occupational categories.

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative analysis, review of government documents, secondary data from PLFS, Census, NFHS, and labour department reports, and sociological insights derived from observations of industrial regions such as Bilaspur, Korba, Raipur and Durg. The paper follows an analytical-descriptive approach to evaluate policy outcomes.

Labour Experiences of Women in Chhattisgarh: Findings and Analysis

1. Economic Dimensions

Women's labour participation in Chhattisgarh is higher than the national average, primarily due to the state's traditional socio-cultural environment and the dominance of agriculture, forestry and allied activities. However, the economic value of women's labour remains disproportionately low. In agriculture, women perform the most labour-intensive tasks such as transplantation, weeding and post-harvest activities, yet wage differentials persist. The absence of land rights for many women reduces their bargaining power and limits their economic independence.

In industrial zones, women are often concentrated in low-skill jobs such as packing, sorting, cleaning, catering and textile work. Even where industries hire women for technical roles, the number remains significantly lower than that of men. Wage discrimination, though illegal, continues informally through contractual mechanisms. Self-help group-based employment has improved income for rural women, but earnings still fall below living-wage standards.

2. Social and Cultural Dimensions

Gender norms continue to influence women's labour choices. While tribal women enjoy substantial freedom, women in rural and urban patriarchal communities face restrictions on mobility, night-shifts and industrial work. Domestic responsibilities limit the time available for skill development and full-time employment. The double burden of household work and wage labour creates physical and emotional stress, reducing long-term upward mobility.

3. Policy Awareness and Implementation Gaps

A major finding is the limited awareness of labour rights among women workers. The POSH Act remains poorly implemented in smaller industries, shops, factories and service sectors. Internal Complaints Committees exist mostly in government offices, not in the private sector. Maternity benefits are often bypassed for contractual women workers. Labour inspectors face heavy workloads, making regular inspection difficult.

4. Occupational Safety, Health and Mobility Issues

Women in mining, construction and brick-kilns face acute health risks due to dust exposure, heat, chemical hazards and long working hours. Creche facilities are rare, restricting mothers from participating in full-time employment. In urban service sectors, women face risks associated with late-night shifts, inadequate transport safety and harassment.

5. Technological and Skill Aspects

Chhattisgarh's policy aims to improve women's skills through ITIs and livelihood missions, yet enrolments in technical trades remain limited. Women mostly receive training in traditional skills like tailoring, beauty, food processing and handicrafts, which may not guarantee sustainable income. The need for digital skills, automation-related skills, and STEM education is significant but underdeveloped.

Discussion

The analysis shows that the Women's Labour Policy of Chhattisgarh has made positive contributions but remains constrained by deeper structural and institutional barriers. The policy's progressive approach is overshadowed by widespread informalisation, patriarchal norms and weak enforcement. In tribal areas, cultural acceptance of women's work exists, but economic gains remain low due to forest dependence and lack of market integration. In urban regions, new job opportunities have emerged, but they also introduce new vulnerabilities. Industrial sectors remain male-dominated, limiting upward mobility for women.

A sociological reading reveals that gendered inequalities persist because labour reforms focus more on legal provisions and less on changing institutional behaviour, employer practices and socio-cultural norms. Policies do not automatically dismantle entrenched power hierarchies; they must be supported by enforcement, awareness, community engagement and gender-sensitive planning.

Suggestions

1. Strengthen enforcement of labour laws through digital monitoring, increased staffing, and periodic audits.
2. Promote high-skill technical training for women, including automation, digital tools, and industrial technology.
3. Ensure universal implementation of the POSH Act in all establishments.
4. Expand formal employment opportunities and regulate the gig economy.
5. Provide safe transportation, creches, sanitation and restrooms for women workers.
6. Integrate tribal women's forest-based livelihoods with modern value chains.
7. Adopt gender budgeting and develop district-wise labour data systems.
8. Promote public campaigns to shift patriarchal attitudes and support women's mobility.

Conclusion

Chhattisgarh's Women's Labour Policy is a significant step toward gender-equitable development. However, its effectiveness depends on addressing structural inequalities, informal labour dynamics and socio-cultural barriers. A future-ready labour system requires an integrated approach involving the state, industries, communities and women

workers themselves. With sustained effort, Chhattisgarh can emerge as a model state for women's labour empowerment in India.

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