

## **A STUDY ON GENDER BIAS, ECONOMIC CONDITION AND CASTE OF FEMALE LABOURERS IN CASHEW SECTOR**

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### **Abstract**

Despite Kerala's remarkable achievements in the social sector, improvements in quality of life are not distributed uniformly. This study is intended to explore gender bias, poverty and caste of female workers in cashew industry. The competitiveness of the cashew industry in Kerala is mainly attributed to abundant, skilled, cheap female workers. Exploration of the life of cashew processing women workers indicates high levels of illiteracy, poverty, gender based violence, and caste based inequities. Strengthening the public provisions of social services is a necessary prerequisite for improving the quality of life.

**Key Words:** Gender Bias, Poverty, Caste, Female Workers, Cashew Industry.

### **Introduction**

Kerala's incredible triumphs in the field of education and social development have been broadly praised in the world of academic world as well as in policy - making circles. Kerala is India's most erudite state; this is true for both men and women. Nearly 90 per cent of women receive some education, in contrast to 54 per cent of all Indian women. The socio - political process including the social transformation, the contributions of erstwhile monarchs and the communist

movements of Kerala and success of the State in providing education care has not only helped curb population overexpansion and female infanticide.

Yet, despite these achievements in the broader socio - economic context, an array of studies have highlighted inequities and differentials in quality of life between genders, social classes, castes and different regions (Mencher, 1980., Jeffry, 1993., Saradmoni, 1994). The enhanced status of women in Kerala's development paradigm is reflected in higher levels of sex ratio, life expectancy, education and politicization. But it would be erroneous to assume that there is no discrimination against women (Jeffry, 1993., Saradmoni, 1994). With no change in the patriarchal structure of family and society, married women remain victims of gender discrimination, subjected to physical torture and mental harassment from their men. Women suffer from the lack of autonomy and empowerment, needing permission from their husbands to go to the market or to visit friends or relatives. The current socio - political trends arising out of the neoliberal policies including increasing informal sector employment, retreat of the state from the provision of social services, and weakening of the labor unions further widen the inequities and endangers the interests of the poor, especially women (Elson, 1994., Wiegersma, 1997) . The injustice for workers such as low wages (Tilly, 2004) and the interlocking effect of multiple oppressions at workplace (including gender oppression) affect the health of women workers (Swaminathan, 2005). Gender specific inequities often deny them the basic human needs of physical and psychological health (Doyal, 1995).

The bulk of women in the work place are employed in traditional industries, among which cashew processing and the making of coir and beedi are the most prominent. This study on cashew - processing female workers of Kollam Municipal Corporation, in the Kollam district of Kerala, is designed to explore the unequal power relations and multiple faces of discrimination in various domains.

## **Methodology**

### **Setting**

Cashew, a tropical fruit, is grown mainly for the edible kernel of the nut and phenolic oil in the shell lining. Cashew processing is a traditional export oriented labor - intensive industry with limited use of technology; approximately 95 per cent of cashew workers are female (Kannan, 1983). Work is divided among gender lines. Women perform manual tasks such as shelling, peeling, and grading. These tasks are performed while squatting / sitting on the floor. Men are

responsible for roasting and work in the heating and cooling sections which require some technical expertise.

The cashew processing industry in India is clustered around the Kollam region in Kerala, which is traditionally known as the global cashew trading capital. Cashew processing is a labor intensive industry and has a long history of employing a large number of female workers. The export of cashew kernel from Kerala was 36,390 metric tons in 2017 with a value of 2580 crores and this made it around 43.78 per cent of the total cashew kernel exports from India to the world in 2017 (Many, 2019). This reveals the significance of the region in the cashew processing industry in India. The cashew processing factories in Kerala work under both public and private ownership, but most are under the private ownership and they are the major market players who interconnect the region with global market economies (Many, 2019). A majority of the firms are located in shacks and the conditions of work are appallingly poor. Increasing levels of exploitation in the private firms, inefficiency of public sector agencies and discriminatory practices at work and at home, coupled with the lack of adequate political support, all create an environment in which the female workers struggle to maintain wellbeing.

Male factory workers are generally salaried employees who are paid monthly and receive a certain amount of compensation when factories close seasonally (as when raw nuts are unavailable). Female cashew workers are paid by the piece and generally receive nothing when a factory closes for a period of time.

### **Objective of the Study**

The objective of this study is to decipher the socio - economic conditions of cashew workers.

### **Sample of Work - Factories**

For the study of work organization, sample of the 8 cashew factories in Kollam Municipal Corporation were selected randomly of which six were private and one each were public and cooperative sector firms.

### **Data Collection among Workers**

A variety of quantitative and qualitative methods were used to elicit data. In a baseline survey, a 20 per cent sample of households (n = 388) was selected randomly. Of this sample, only 340 households (having 450 workers) were surveyed; reasons for non - inclusion were: retirement from work, shifting location or change of employment. For the baseline survey, a standardized

questionnaire was used. Items in the questionnaire were mainly focused on social class and caste backgrounds, demographics, type of work, and membership in the trade union.

Subsequently, 50 per cent of the households in the baseline survey (170 households with 225 workers) were selected for an in - depth study by choosing alternate households. Measures including in - depth interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions and case reports were used to gather information. The in - depth interviews highlighted employment details, gender inequities and other oppressive relations at work and at home. Focus group discussions and case reports elicited information on various dimensions of gender and poverty related inequities. The fieldwork for the study was conducted over 3 months from January 2020 to March 2020.

## **Results**

### **Work and Social Conditions**

Cashew processing is characterized by high levels of underemployment and informal work (employment on a casual or temporary basis by private firms). The underemployment rate is much higher in the public sector, which may provide a few weeks of work during the year compared to the private and cooperative sectors which may provide several months of work. Reflecting the gender division of labor, the female workers receive their wages at a piece rate. Men get a monthly salary which enables them to claim 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the salary during no work seasons; this is denied to the female workers. The piece - rate wage system for female workers is an obvious means of exploitation as it drives them to work harder even skipping breaks for food or rest. The casual laborers are paid only at a consolidated rate which is less than half the minimum wage. Other than wages, the welfare benefits for the permanent workers were largely limited to gratuity, employees' provident fund (EPF), cashew workers relief welfare fund, health care facilities at employees' state insurance (ESI) outlets and a very nominal amount of pension. For GPF, workers have to pay a contribution of 8.3 per cent of their weekly wages and for ESI, it is 1.5 per cent. Though the deductions are regular from the wages, nonpayment / underpayment of gratuity and provident funds, ESI contributions, dearness allowance and denial of health care - including maternity benefits - were other forms of oppression in the workplace. As many as 85 per cent of workers in the private firms revealed that they did not get the provident fund credit card, though money had been deducted from their wages for years. Thus, their status was more like that of the workers in the unorganized / informal sector.

The physical conditions of the work site were deplorable and included unhygienic floors, dirty work surroundings, stinking latrines and occasional accidents because of falling and dilapidated roofs. None of the eight sample 'factories' including the public and co-operative sectors provided adequate facilities such as sufficient space, light, fans, crèche (day nursery), drinking water and canteen as per the norms of the Factories Act, 1949.

Shelling was the most crowded section of the workplace. Here female workers squat in rows on an uneven floor filled with burned nutshells and dust. In these cramped rooms women squat tightly packed together. Their backs touch the backs of the women behind them and they rub elbows with the women sitting to their sides. Strict surveillance is maintained at the work sheds which are supervised by men. The female workers are not allowed to pay attention to others, speak, nor stretch their back during work. They seldom go to the toilet because of constant monitoring. Their movements and interactions during work invite disciplinary actions including angry scolding.

Given the oppressive conditions at work, the trade union could have provided valuable support but most women felt highly dissatisfied with the union's lack of support. The union's lack of vision and strategies to empower women undercuts the much acclaimed politicization of Kerala's women and reduces their collective bargaining power as well. . As one of the workers pointed out *"I have united the workers against the denial of welfare benefits, resisting the scandals of immorality and threat of dismissal from the employers. But the trade union did not want us in leading roles but just for filling gaps in processions"*.

### **Intra - household Inequalities**

Apart from the exploitative relationships at the work place, female workers were subjected to the enduring stronghold of dominant patriarchal structures in various domains. More than 80 per cent of the female workers did not receive any kind of domestic help from their husbands while discrimination in food allocation practices limited their access to food. According to the mother of a 14 year old girl, *"Often I make compromises while sharing food and give a lesser amount to my daughter and I consume even less to serve the needs of my 16 year old son and my husband"*.

### **Resource Control and Decision Making**

Despite bearing the burden of hard work, even skipping food in order to save time and money, female workers exert very little control over their income; 23 per cent of the female workers in the study were not allowed to spend any money on their own and 41 per cent were forced to give at least a part of their weekly wages to men. Female workers spent > 90 per cent of their income for household expenditures highlighting their role as substantive contributors to the household. Yet this was not often reflected in their role in decision making processes; 67 per cent of them reported that men make the important decisions. Also, the men spent only 40 - 60 per cent of their income for family expenses and for those men who consume alcohol the per cent was even less (20 - 40 per cent).

### **Mental Stress and Violence**

At home, 35 per cent of the female workers were subjected to physical beatings by their husbands. Lack of trust and desertion by men, violence during sexual relations and various other means of domination and control were pervasive in their lives.

At work, strict surveillance including use of language itself as a means of coercion, constraint, intimidation and abuse was a major source of mental stress. Verbal abuse (96 per cent), indecent comments and gaze (69 per cent) on the part of the management were not uncommon. Mostly, the youngsters bear the brunt of it. A 19 year old girl recalled her experience. The supervisor of the firm pulled her hands making a vulgar comment “*Why is your chest so swollen?*” Humiliated and depressed the girl quit the job. But the next day her friend retorted to the supervisor, “*Will you behave the same way to your children?*” only to get abuse and a drastic low output while weighing her work for the day. Taking advantage of poor women’s desire for better life it appears that young managers at the workplace may sexually exploit them by offering small favors in return. The cultural inhibition and imposed fear about morality often impair the women’s resistance. Often this violence, compounded by lack of access to food, makes the women mentally stressed. As pointed out by a 40 year old landless woman. “*I leave for work early in the morning with an empty stomach to reach the worksite by 8 am. If I am late even by minutes that day’s job is forgone. My husband drinks and beats me up almost all the nights. Any lack of resources including food at home ends up in violent beatings. During pregnancy (twin), I was hospitalized for many days following a kick by him. I bear all the hardships for the sake of my children. Many a times I thought of killing myself*”.

### **Dowry and Land Ownership**

In recent decades, commercialization of marriage has brought many new variants to the dowry, the contributions in cash or kind from the bride's family to the groom during marriage. Currently, in the study area, the dowry includes cash (people call it 'pocket money' since legally cash cannot be given to the groom as part of dowry), land, golden ornaments, expensive furniture and household appliances.

Lack of adequate assets to provide a dowry often leaves female workers unmarried. A 28 year old worker mourned "*I started cashew work at 16 years and earned some money for dowry without spending much even for food. But the groom's demand was much higher than my earnings. Where can I go for the money? My parents are dead*". To provide for a dowry, workers were often forced to sell their limited landed property or use a form of "voluntary retirement from permanent employment" to obtain lump sum monetary benefits, specifically payments in lieu of gratuity and provident funds.

Although 33 per cent of female workers own a small piece of land in their names it is not necessarily a symbol of their economic autonomy. Rather, they acquired it as a prerequisite for marriage because land transaction to the groom as part of dowry is illegal. Being recorded as 'owners' in the land registers does not necessarily give women control; decisions about land use / sale are made by men. In the words of a 26 year old worker, "*Now I stay with my parents. My husband sent me back to my natal home because I haven't signed the documents to sell the land in my name which I got as part of dowry*".

### **Intersection of Poverty, Caste and Gender**

The living conditions of the female workers were appallingly poor. Table 1 displays the fact. They have limited landholdings, impoverished housing, and lack of access to adequate water, electricity and toilet facilities. The educational levels of workers were disquieting. Twenty - two percent of them had not attended school. Importantly, illiteracy was much high (nearly 50 per cent); the majority of the women who had attended primary school were still not able to read and write. Table 2 presents the details.

**Table 1**  
**Land ownership pattern and availability of household facilities among the workers**  
**(Land in cents. 100cents =1.5 hectare)**

<b>Land Ownership</b>	<b>No. of Households</b>	<b>Types of House</b>	<b>No. of Households</b>
Landless	13(2.89%)	Tiled	266(59.1%)
1-10	394(87.56%)	Thatched	106(23.56%)
11-20	36(8%)	Tin sheeted	52(11.56%)
21-30	8(1.3%)	Terrace	26(5.78%)
31 & above	2(0.4%)	-	-
Total	450(100%)	Total	450(100%)
<b>Electricity</b>		<b>Latrine</b>	
Yes	350(77.78%)	Closet	68(15.11%)
No	100(22.22%)	Borehole	302(67.11%)
		No	80(17.78%)
Total	450(100%)		450(100%)

**Table 2**  
**Caste Wise Distribution of Education of the Workers**

<b>Caste</b>	<b>Illiterate (Never Attended School)</b>	<b>Lower Primary</b>	<b>Upper Primary</b>	<b>High School</b>	<b>College ( Plus 2)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Backward Castes	38 (18)	70 (33.18)	70 (33.2)	28 (13.27)	5 (2.37)	211 (46.89)
Scheduled Castes	34 (35.79)	25 (26.32)	14 (14.74)	21 (22.11)	1 (1.0)	95 (21.11)
Muslim	22 (26.83)	22 (26.83)	22 (26.83)	16 (19.51)		82 (18.22)
Nair	5 (8.8)	18 (33.3)	22 (38.6)	11 (19.3)		56 (12.44)
Christian		1 (28.6)	4 (57.1)	1 (14.3)		6 (1.33)
Total	102 (22.2)	142 (30.9)	133 (28.9)	78 (17.0)	5 (1.1)	450 (100)

Seventy per cent of the households failed to provide two square meals a day all year round for all its members. It is the women who go hungry more frequently. The quality of available food is questionable; milk, eggs, meat, fish, and fruits are often not included in the menu. Despite stretching themselves beyond their physical capability for survival, the women and their families



simply do not have sufficient food to satisfy their hunger. Analysis by caste revealed that the scheduled castes were more deprived in terms of living conditions, literacy and lack of access to adequate food. The second most deprived group was Muslims.

### **Conclusion**

This study highlights certain pertinent issues in the context of Kerala's development experiences and the need to minimize issues related gender bias, poverty and caste of female workers in cashew industry. Despite better achievements of the state in social development, cashew add to the pockets of poverty and underdevelopment in a way that is similar to other traditional sectors of agriculture, such as coir, fish and beedi. Apart from simple lack of access to tangible basic services, the poverty of the cashew workers embodies lack of power, isolation, denial of self - identity and a lack of a dignified atmosphere at home and work. A culturally appropriate and feasible multipronged approach, to deal with women's strategic and practical needs, at the policy and local level would empower them to meet the challenges. Ingredients in this multi - pronged approach would include measures for basic provisions of food and shelter, creative adult education efforts with a focus on democratic relations at home and public space for both men and women, and provisions for dignified physical and social environment at work.

Despite investments in the welfare sector, these measures have only scarcely reached those for whom they were primarily initiated. This indicates a crisis of the public sector when, in the process of providing welfare, it fails to compete with the private sector. The latter expands and further adds to exploitation of labor of the poor women without providing them adequate basic welfare measures. In the totality of women's lives, the plural faces of gender inequity raise serious apprehensions regarding not only women's health but also the gender concerns in Kerala's development path.

As Schuftan (2003) argues, privatization accelerates poverty, lowers the access and quality of services for the poor and widens the gap between rich and poor. Provision of quality life will be possible only when public development policies are strengthened in an egalitarian, gender sensitive and socio - culturally and ecologically appropriate ways. An integrated approach to the provision of public health and developmental services with active participation from local self-governing institutions, trade unions, and the community, particularly women will be the most meaningful way to promote equality. By highlighting these inadequacies, the intention was not to

belittle the achievements of Kerala but to delineate the next step for breaking new ground for a more meaningful and comprehensive planning process. This process needs to be more sensitive to the needs of the deprived sections, especially women.

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