



Women at Work: Health and Safety

Without structured maternity leave and compensatory income, mothers, in Delhi, return as early as three weeks after childbirth and most are back at work in less than two months.

-Bulletin of WHO, 2020





UNORGANISED SECTOR - CHALLENGES

95% of the women workforce in India are employed in the informal economy, which is plagued with minimal wages, denial of rights, and a lack of social security and benefits.

Their health and safety concerns are influenced by factors like gender disparities, sexual abuse, malnutrition, poverty, early marriage, illiteracy and lack of access to proper healthcare.

These larger social issues manifest in poor health conditions, substandard working life, harassment at work, inadequate and unequal wage structure.



UNORGANISED SECTOR - HEALTH ISSUES

Issues of undernourishment in maternal and child health can be attributed to the lack of maternity leaves in the informal sector.

Women working as laborers in urban areas live in slums and have no access to sanitation services such as clean water supply and basic menstrual hygiene supplies.

87% of the female workforce is employed in agriculture and 70-76% of women work as heavy manual laborers, making them more susceptible to occupational hazards.



LACK OF SAFETY PROVISIONS

There are little to no provisions to address issues of discrimination and sexual harassment at work. Widespread illiteracy and lack of awareness amongst women hinder them from accessing justice.

Public policies further fail to address women's issues in the informal sector. The Factories Act of 1948 is applicable only to 8% of the workforce in the organized sector. Even the Unorganized Sector Social Security Act of 2008 does not adequately cover women workers.



ORGANISED SECTOR - CHALLENGES

Fundamentally, the lack of access to equal employment opportunities affects women's health and well-being.

Underrepresentation and the wage gap not just trivialize but also actively invisible the concerns around women's health and safety in the workplace.

There is a widespread lack of awareness around menstrual health and hygiene, leading to improper and underdeveloped infrastructure for the same.



MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH ISSUES

Growing stress at work due to heavy workload, improper working hours, role ambiguity, conflicts, job security, lack of recognition, sexual harassment, unequal pay, etc., affect mental health and causes stress-induced diseases.

A survey of working women in major cities by ASSOCHAM revealed that 78% of women suffered from acute and chronic ailments like obesity, depression, chronic backache, diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, heart and kidney diseases due to multitasking home and work responsibilities.



THE MATERNITY BENEFIT ACT AND ITS GAPS

The Maternity Benefit (Amended) Act, 2017 entitles 26 weeks of maternity leave to women. However, women often face wage cuts, loss of opportunities, discrimination and lack of access to post-natal mother and childcare facilities upon their return.

The Act entitles women to paid leave for six weeks after a miscarriage but its implementation gets lost in the loopholes of documentation and proofs.

The Act does not take Wilful Termination of Pregnancy (abortion) into consideration ignoring the emotional trauma that is detrimental to the overall health of women.