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Understanding Women's Labour Market Behaviour in Contemporary Kerala:

The Cases of Salesgirls and Domestic Workers

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Understanding Women's Labour Market Behaviour in Contemporary Kerala:

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Abstract

Despite the achievements of the Indian state of Kerala in development indicators with a negligible gender gap, when it comes to employment, the performance of women's paid participation falls below expectations. The low work participation rate of women in Kerala over the decades has been showing signs of improvement in the recent PLFS surveys. The paper argues that the recent economic changes have created an increase in demand for low-paid work of women, notably in retail sales and domestic service. On the basis of primary survey, supplemented by secondary data and literature, the paper analyses the nature of this increasing demand of these two categories in Kerala.

1. Introduction

Kerala found its place in the development discourse for decades for its remarkable achievements in high human development indicators despite the low economic growth. With the integration of the economies under globalisation in the neoliberal order, changes were bound to influence this small south Indian state too. The liberalisation regime adopted across India and the changes in the change in the pattern of international migration in the state also have direct and indirect implications on the economy in general in terms of increasing economic growth and income inequality (Alhuwalia 2000, Kohli 2006, Sreeraj & Vakulabaranam 2016, Kannan & Hari 2020). This has had an impact on the labour market as well. No doubt, these changes have created demand for several white-collar jobs. These changes in the economy are also likely to create a significant increase in the demand for low-paid, low-skilled jobs, especially for women. While those at the upper end of the increasing inequality are likely to create this demand, it is likely that those at the lower end are the ones servicing it. The objective of this paper is to focus on the specific kinds of employment

¹ This paper heavily draws on Alexander E. (2024) Women and Work: Demand for low-paid work and movement to Cities in Kerala, presented at the Development Dialogues Series at SDS.

generated for women low-paid work in the informal sector of Kerala economy, particularly in domestic service and retail sales.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first section briefly discusses the methodology of the study, followed by the second section that contextualises the study. The third section deals with the demand created in the retail sector for salesgirls, discussing the nature of demand in small and large retail shops in Kochi. The demand generated for domestic workers is looked at in the fourth section. The last section concludes the discussion.

2. Methodology

The paper is based on a primary survey conducted in Kochi city, Kerala between July 2022 and April 2024. Kochi is the shopping hub for central Kerala² and historically the most important commercial and economic centre. One of the important sources of information to understand the increase in demand for salesgirls and domestic workers can be the employers themselves. However, there was a general reluctance on the part of employers to answer questions about terms of contract and recruitment process. Nevertheless, two shops, both in retail textile sector were chosen for primary data survey, based on their willingness to cooperate. As for the case of domestic workers, primary survey was conducted among 20 households, mainly in Kochi. As there is no readily available database of employers of domestic workers, the respondents were chosen on the basis of snowball sampling.

To ensure consistency in the findings, the leaders and activists of trade unions and women's organisations who work with salesgirls and domestic workers, both with and without political affiliations were interviewed, amounting to 15 interviews. 20 women who work as domestic workers and 20 salesgirls who work in retail sector in the city were also interviewed. The primary survey employed the use of open-ended interview schedules to capture the nature of demand for low-end category women's work in the city.

To supplement the findings, secondary sources – data and literature were used. The secondary data range from official government records like statistics offered in Kerala Shops and Commercial Establishments Act Reports to large-scale data including Indian Census, national Sample Survey Employment Unemployment Surveys (NSS EUS) and Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS). To identify the major categories of low-end demand for women's work,

² The major retail ventures in Kochi are in gold, textile, furniture and home accessories and home appliances (Directorate of Industries and Commerce, Kerala 2022).

newspaper advertisements that appeared in on the popular Malayalam dailies, Malayala Manorama were also used.³

3. Contextualising the changes in Labour Market Behaviour of Women in Kerala

The success story of Indian economic growth was accompanied by increasing income inequality (Ahluwalia 2000, Kohli 2006, Chandrashekar & Ghosh 2007). The increase in both rural and urban inequality since the liberalisation policies of the early 1990s is widely acknowledged (Deaton & Dreze 2002, Sundaram & Tendulkar 2003, Jha 2004, Pal & Ghosh 2007). The increase in economic income inequality in Kerala also follows the same timeline. Another factor that added to the increased income inequality in Kerala is the change in the pattern of international migration. From the 1990s, we see a change in the pattern of international migration, marking a decline in the earlier low-skilled migration and an increase in high-skilled migration from relatively better-off families. This has also contributed to the increasing income inequality in the state.⁴

Table 1: number of urban households (per 1000) in the highest monthly per capita consumption expenditure class

Year	Kerala	India
1999-2000	79	54
2004-2005	110	74
2011-12	151	142

Source: NSS Reports 458, 515, 554

The increasing inequality in the state from the 1990s, in the context of liberalisation and change in the pattern of international migration, has created a significant section of wealthy people. The remittance sending high-skilled emigrants to the private sector IT sector professionals falls under this category. Another important aspect to add in this context is the increasing urbanisation in the state. According to Census 2011, the share of urban population in the state

³ For detailed discussion on the analysis of newspaper analysis in identifying salesgirls and domestic workers as two important categories, refer to Alexander (2025).

⁴ Until 1990s, Kerala was characterized by its low economic growth and income inequality yet high human development indicators. This was often referred to as Kerala model of development (Dreze & Sen, 2002). However, from the 1990s, we see a change in the Kerala economy in terms of increase in economic growth and income inequality with the human development indicators continuing to perform well (Sreeraj & Vakulabaranam 2016, Kannan & Hari 2020).

increased to around 47 per cent (Jajati & Raman 2021). There is a growing tendency of urban affluence in Kerala, in line with the pattern seen at the national level. Urban affluence is not easy to be captured in all its elements. But we do find some indication in the secondary data. Table 1, for instance, can help us partly understand the growing urban affluence in Kerala at a pace higher than the national average. This relative prosperity in recent times of the middle and upper classes can influence the kinds of jobs created in the economy. The rapid increase in the large shopping malls, high-quality, expensive resorts and restaurants, expensive private healthcare facilities, and education institutions in recent years indicate the generation of such high-end demands in the economy. These changes have no doubt created some white-collar.

There is also an increase in the demand for women workers in different low-category jobs in retail, healthcare, hospitality and education sectors. These are typically low-skilled/ low-paid contractual jobs and often require some education to perform more efficiently. Women are preferred for many such jobs and to identify them we analysed the newspaper advertisements that appeared in one of the popular Malayalam dailies, Malayala Manorama for 2019 (as a pre-pandemic year). In the analysis, two categories stood out, with the magnitude of advertisements and its overwhelming preference for women workers - salesgirls and domestic workers.

With the reading of the secondary data and literature, we hypothesise that the changes in the labour market behaviour of women in Kerala in recent years are a direct result of the economic changes in the state from the 1990s. The role of increasing inequality can be critical in understanding the labour market behaviour of women in the low-end categories from both the demand and supply sides. With this hypothesis, we conducted a primary survey to see the reality of changes in the labour market behaviour of women in Kerala, especially the nature of the demand created. The next two sections briefly discuss some of the major findings.

4. The Case of Salesgirls

Kerala ranks among the top in terms of Monthly Per Capita Expenditure (MPCE) in both urban and rural areas in various rounds of the National Sample Survey (Report of Household Consumer Expenditure in Kerala, 2018). The expansion of the retail sector and consumerism in the state and the demand created for women's low-paid work in the retail sector as a consequence of this change will be the focus of this section.

There are close to 28,000 shops registered in Kerala under the Shops and Commercial Establishment Act 1960, employing more than 5 and a half lakhs persons as of 2016 (Annual

Report on the working of Kerala Shop and Commercial Act 1960, 2016).⁵ From our reading of the primary survey findings and secondary literature women are overwhelmingly preferred in many categories within the retail sector. ‘Salesgirls’ is a common term used to denote women in sales in the retail sector (Vierse 2014). The feminisation of the retail sector is a tendency that we see across the developed and developing world (Randall 2004). The feminisation of the retail sector is an outcome of the availability of surplus labour of women in the economy who can be employed at lower wages. The retail sector in Kerala expanded during the 1990s with the onset of the liberalisation policies. This further accelerated the process of feminisation of the retail sector in the state (Muyarath & Roopak 2018).

In the following discussion, we highlight some of the important observations from our primary survey on the demand for salesgirls, especially in the retail textile sector. Though there are several differences in the nature of demand for salesgirls in different shops, some factors remain common. First, for the employers, for sales staff and related roles, the preference for women was expressed as an obvious choice. Considering most of their customers were women, recruiting women as sales staff was ‘automatic’. An aspect they highlighted is that the customer base is mostly women, so it makes sense to have women as sales staff. Another reason stated by the employers for their preference for women in salesgirls are more ‘patient’ than men. One of the employers reported, ‘To deal with customers, the sales staff need to have good patience. Our female staff are more efficient in taking care of this need’.

In the primary survey with the employers, at a preliminary level, other than ‘femininity’, there was no explicit statement of any other reason for the preference of women in the retail sector. If that was the only reason, before the 1990s, retail sector sales staff categories would not have been male-dominated. This made us look further into the matter. From the primary survey, it was noted that employers perceive women as ‘easier to handle’ and as less likely to create ‘trouble’. Employers also manage to make women perform many tasks in addition to the job requirements that may not be specified at the time of recruitment.

They are not paid additionally for any of these tasks that fall beyond the job description of salesgirls. Apart from this, in most of the retail shops, work hours expand beyond 8 hours, for which they are not paid overtime charges as per the norm. The employers realise that women

⁵ The available data on the number of shops and employees registered under the Act is likely to be a major underestimation as the shops tend not to register to escape having to pay benefits to their employees. Patrick (2000), in his study, has observed similar challenges with regard to the data available under the Kerala Shop and Commercial Establishment Act 19

employees could be paid lower wages, and at the same time, could also avoid ‘labour problems’ usually associated with male employees.

Now we enter our second category – domestic workers.

5. The case of Domestic workers

Domestic work has been identified as one of the important emerging forms of employment opportunity for women in the informal sector, especially in developing countries like India (Chen & Raveendran 2012). When we look at the secondary data, we see a decline in domestic work in Kerala in line with the national trend between 2004-05 to 2011-12 (NSS EUS 2004-05, 2011-12). It is unlikely that there is a decline in demand for domestic work, given the increase in employment of women in formal sectors, especially in IT and other modern professions and the outmigration of high-skilled migrants leaving behind their elderly parents to be taken care of. To understand the reality of the situation, the primary survey tried to gauge the extent and nature of demand for domestic work in recent years.

Table 2: WPR of urban women per 1000 in the highest decile 2011

State	Per 1000 WPR of urban women in highest decile
Kerala	207
All-India	170

Source: NSS report No 554

The interviews with employers of domestic workers revealed that all these households have women engaged in paid work currently or in the recent past. With the nuclear families functioning in a manner that does not have the family support in the childcare and domestic chores, the task is being delegated to hired help. We also see an increase in urban affluence in Kerala, as noted in Table 1. With the nuclear families functioning in a manner that does not have the family support in the childcare and domestic chores, the task is being delegated to hired help. In addition, the paid work participation of women from the affluent section is increasing (see Table 2). This tendency of working women households employing domestic workers is an established phenomenon within the Indian context (Neetha 2004, Devika 2019, Chakravarty & Nayak 2022).

As for the case of elderly care, in India it depends heavily on family and/or domestic help (Dey 2017, Rajan 2001, Rajan 2008). With the increase in high-skilled migration of relatively better off emigrants with their spouses and children, there is a care deficit created in the Kerala

economy. A large part of it is being met largely by hired help (Rajan et al. 2020) as confirmed by our primary survey.

In the following discussion we highlight some of the important observations made during the primary survey. We see that live-in domestics and daily commuting domestics are two major categories of domestic work. In Kerala, the demand for live-in domestic workers is being created primarily by the households for elderly care and patient care. This is usually done to make up for the care deficit created for the elderly in relatively well-off households, either due to international migration or internal migration. The demand for live-in domestics in the case of elderly care tends to be a long-term undertaking and is becoming more and more common in Kerala. Within live-in domestic workers, the pay differs based on the qualifications and responsibilities of the domestic worker. The women working as live-in domestic workers could be categorised into two – with and without professional training. The former is sorted after in cases of patient care while the latter is preferred more as a companion in the absence of children living with elderly parents.

The other category is daily commuting domestic workers. The demand for this category of workers is on the rise in different parts of the state, including rural areas, but more so in the urban areas. With the increasing urbanization and the increasing number of working women in urban households, the tasks of cleaning and cooking are getting delegated to the hired domestic workers. For this, they employ the use of social networks consisting of friends and family to find the person that best suits their needs. Like in the case of live-in domestics, trust is an important factor that is considered when finding a domestic worker. This is one of the reasons why migrant women from other parts of the country have still not replaced the demand for Malayali domestic workers despite the former being available at lower wages.

The wages of daily commuting domestics are lower than that of the live-in domestics in Kerala, like elsewhere. Within the category of daily commuting, domestics, a distinction can be made based on whether they have single employers or multiple employers. With the increase in demand for domestic workers in Kerala in general, there is easy availability of work within short distances of initial employment. Also, unlike the case of full-time domestics, daily commuting domestics are hired by multiple or single employers for specific tasks that may be completed within a short span of time. This is very common in metropolitan cities like Delhi where domestics work in multiple households within the same region.

6. Conclusion

The analysis offered in this paper attempts to highlight the demand created for low-end work of women in the informal sector in recent years. There are several other emerging categories in low-end work of women, some of which are home-based and hence difficult to capture. A common aspect among all of them is the low-pay and the abysmal contracts. This begs the question, despite these serious limitations, why do women keep entering them. This necessitates an analysis of the household conditions of those that are at the other end of the inequality, supplying their labour to the low-end jobs.

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