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A CRITICAL STUDY ON THE WORKING CONDITIONS OF WOMEN SALTPAN WORKERS IN THOOTHUKUDI DISTRICT

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Abstract

Thoothukudi, a significant coastal city in Tamil Nadu, serves as a central hub for the state's expansive salt production landscape. As the second-largest contributor to India's salt output, it trails only the state of Gujarat in this regard. Salt pans, which have been utilized for centuries, remain a crucial source of salt across numerous regions globally. The women employed in the salt pans face a multitude of challenges, and their rights have often been infringed upon. They receive **meagre wages**, lack adequate work safeguards, and encounter a scarcity of safety measures. These are just a few of the hardships they confront in their daily lives. This article examines the effectiveness of the **legislative framework** in protecting the rights and well-being of women workers employed in the salt pans of Thoothukudi district, Tamil Nadu. The women salt pan workers in Thoothukudi face numerous obstacles, including receiving low wages, lacking adequate workplace protections, **restroom facilities**, **rest sheds** and experiencing a shortage of **safety measures**. These challenges highlight the need for a more robust legislative framework to safeguard the rights and well-being of these workers, who play a vital role in the region's salt production industry.

Keywords: *legislative framework, meagre wages, restroom facilities, rest sheds, safety measures*

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Introduction

The salt industry holds a significant position in India's economy, particularly in Tamil Nadu, where Thoothukudi is a major salt-producing region. Women constitute a substantial portion of the workforce in this sector, comprising an estimated 60-70% of the total salt workers. However, their critical contributions and the unique challenges they face often go unrecognized and unaddressed. While the industry's economic importance is widely acknowledged, a deeper understanding of the roles, experiences, and realities of women salt workers is crucial for promoting their overall well-being, empowerment, and more equitable growth within the industry. Women salt workers face multifaceted barriers that perpetuate their subordinate status. Their isolation, limited access to education and training, and the heavy physical demands of their work, compounded by issues like childbirth, domestic responsibilities, and even abuse, severely constrain their opportunities and agency. Despite the collaborative need for women's labor in salt production, they continue to face pervasive gender-based discrimination, including unequal pay, lack of job security, and limited access to essential protective equipment.

Women Saltpan Workers in Thoothukudi

Thoothukudi is a major port city in Tamil Nadu and home to much of the state's salt harvesting terrain. Salt production is carried out on approximately 25,000 acres on the outskirts of Thoothukudi, producing about 25 lakh tonnes of salt every year. Around 50,000 workers are involved in salt production in Thoothukudi, with approximately 21,000 being women. There are a number of reasons why women outnumber males in the salt industry. The constant availability of female laborers makes them a consistent workforce in the salt production process. Salt industries employ a large proportion of men and women migrated from rural to semi-urban regions. Women are generally engaged during the preparation of the pan and later shifting of salt. The simplicity of the work allows even illiterate and low-skilled female workers to find employment in this sector.

Meagre Wages

The low salary rate for female laborers reflects a broader issue of wage disparity and exploitation in the salt industry. Despite often performing labor-intensive tasks such as carrying salt, women are frequently paid less than their male counterparts, based on the presumption that they are less productive. The advantage of the salt industry is that, because solar salt production is so straightforward, it employs even illiterate and low-skilled workers. The

potential for assigning more work to women than to men stems from traditional gender roles, where women are often expected to manage both household responsibilities and contribute to salt production. In salt production, women's roles often include preparing the pans and shifting salt. Although women contribute an equal amount of physical labor, their traditional role in the production cycle is often restricted to invisible, intensive, unskilled work. This can lead to women being assigned a disproportionate amount of work, especially considering that salt production employs even illiterate and low-skilled workers, making it accessible to many women.

The disparity in earnings between male and female saltpan workers is a concerning issue that highlights the exploitation of women in this industry. Male workers earn nearly ₹400-600 per day, while women are paid only around ₹250-₹350¹, despite performing similar arduous labor. This wage gap is not only unjust but also contributes to the financial burden carried by these female workers and their families. Additionally, the lack of proper care and support for the workers' children can lead to high rates of illness and even death, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and hardship. Interestingly, despite these difficulties, rural women in regions like Gujarat view saltpan work as a traditional and familiar occupation.² Even in the face of issues such as migration, contract labor, and lack of basic facilities, these low-educated, rural women rely on the salt industry for their livelihoods. As they grow older, their diminishing physical abilities worsen their economic situation, underscoring the need for comprehensive support and welfare measures to uplift the socio-economic status of these marginalized workers.

Arduous Nature of Work

The work in salt pans is physically grueling and entails repetitive manual labor such as scraping, gathering, and hauling heavy loads of salt. Women, who make up a significant portion of the workforce, toil for extended periods under the relentless sun, frequently without adequate protective equipment. This exposure leads to severe exhaustion, physical strain, and potential health risks. Each salt worker is responsible for shifting an astounding 5 to 7 tons of salt daily, a testament to the sheer physical demands of this occupation.³

¹ "Saltpan Workers happy over govt.dole" *The Hindu*, Sep.9, 2021.

² The Advantage of the salt industry is that because solar salt production is so straightforward, it employs even illiterate and low-skilled workers.

³ S Godson Wisely Dass, "Pinching Reality of Salt Pan Workers Who Toil Without Loos, Safe Drinking Water & Shade in TN", *The New Indian Express*, Apr. 19, 2024, available at: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2024/Apr/19/pinching-reality-of-salt-pan-workers-who-toil-without-loos-safe-drinking-water-shade-in-tn> (last visited on Mar. 8, 2025).

Debt and Dependence

Due to their low and irregular incomes, women saltpan workers are often forced to rely on saltpan owners for credit to meet their basic living expenses. The high interest rates charged by these moneylenders trap the workers in a vicious cycle of debt, making it extremely difficult for them to improve their overall socio-economic status. This precarious financial situation severely undermines the workers' ability to save, invest in their own development, or provide a secure future for themselves and their families. Without the means to build financial stability, these women remain in a state of constant vulnerability, unable to break free from the constraints of poverty and debt.⁴ Addressing this entrenched cycle of debt and lack of economic opportunity is crucial to empowering these women, uplifting their community, and restoring their rights and dignity as workers.

Lack of Maternity Benefits

Women saltpan workers in Thoothukudi lack maternity benefits under the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961. Maternity benefits include paid leave and healthcare coverage. According to The Maternity Benefit Act, women employee shall be entitled to Maternity Benefit provide she works for not less than 80 days in the 12 months immediately preceding the date of her expected delivery in an establishment of an employer. The maximum period for which any women shall be entitled to maternity benefit shall be 26 weeks. Similarly creche facility has been made mandatory for every establishment employing 50 or more employees. The main reason for lack of maternity benefits is the fear of job loss, especially in informal settings. Workers feel pressured by employers not to claim benefits, fearing dismissal. This power dynamic denies women their rights and impacts their health and financial stability.

No Equal Pay for Equal work

There is a significant pay disparity between male and female saltpan workers. Male workers are compensated at a daily rate of Rs.600, while their female counterparts receive only Rs.590 per day for performing the same tasks. This wage gap points to a concerning lack of implementation and enforcement of legislation designed to ensure equal pay for equal work, regardless of gender. The informal and unregulated nature of the salt industry often lacks standardized wage structures and formal employment contracts. This lack of oversight and structure allows employers to exploit the vulnerable position of female saltpan workers, paying

⁴ BOBP-IGO, "Study on the Socio-Economic Status of Workers in the Salt Industry in India" 204 (2006)

them significantly less than what would be considered fair or legal in more formalized and regulated sectors. The absence of robust labor protections in this industry enables employers to take advantage of the precarious economic situations faced by female saltpan workers, resulting in the payment of substandard wages that fall short of just compensation.

Lack of welfare measures

Many saltpans lack basic amenities such as clean drinking water, toilet facilities, and sanitation facilities. This absence of essential facilities poses significant health risks and compromises the dignity of women workers. Without access to clean water, proper restrooms, and adequate sanitation, the women employed in these harsh salt pan environments are forced to endure unsanitary and dehumanizing working conditions. This lack of basic infrastructure not only threatens their physical well-being but also undermines their fundamental human rights and dignity. The limited access to restrooms for women saltpan workers poses significant health and safety challenges. While maintaining hydration is crucial in the harsh conditions of salt pans, the lack of adequate sanitation facilities leads many women to restrict their fluid intake. This intentional dehydration, combined with the already hot and demanding work environment, can result in serious health consequences, including acute kidney injuries. The absence of proper sanitation also increases the risk of urogenital infections, especially during menstruation. Instead of risking health issues, women workers often limit their fluid intake, despite feeling thirsty. This can lead to dehydration and related internal complications. Therefore, providing adequate restroom facilities is essential for protecting the health and dignity of women working in the salt industry.⁵

Occupational Hazards

The harsh conditions of salt pan work significantly affect workers' health. Constant contact with saltwater irritates the skin, and prolonged exposure to intense sunlight can weaken eyesight. Limited access to clean water and inadequate dietary intake further exacerbate these issues.⁶ Access to medical facilities is also often limited, leaving workers vulnerable to various health problems. The saline environment takes a toll on those who live and work in it. Women employed in the salt industries are subject to a variety of workplace dangers. These workers complain of

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5025522/> (Visited on 08.03.2025).

⁶ M.Sagunthala and Dr. K.Sadasivam, "Exploring the Economic and Health Status of Saltpan Workers in Thoothukudi District" 10 *Tijer* 254 (2023).

- Chest pain from lifting and carrying heavy loads of Salt,
- Tendering of feet from a lack of vitamin B-complex and prolonged standing in brine,
- Burning eyes and blurry vision from salt crystals reflecting and radiating light in bright sunlight,
- Dry skin, stomach aches, and other conditions like hyperacidity brought on by prolonged periods of fasting, Dental issues, skin issues, and musculoskeletal issues,
- Excessive strain,
- A Lack of a well-protected water supply, and
- An Unsanitary environment with mosquito breeding all around was the causes of body discomfort, leg cramps, malaria, jaundice etc.,

Long-term exposure to salt fields has been shown in multiple international, national, and field studies to have a number of negative consequences on health. Occupational health issues affecting women saltpan workers include exposure to brine and salt crystals, physical stress, sunshine, and glare from sunlight reflected by salt crystals.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Women employed in the Thoothukudi saltpans confront an array of challenges. They endure grueling work hours under the relentless sun without adequate protection, leading to fatigue. Additionally, their employment is seasonal, and their earnings are meager, depriving them of social and health security. The hazardous work environment and extreme climatic conditions they face contribute to various occupational health issues, including gynaecological problems, renal disorders, dental complications, skin conditions, and musculoskeletal ailments. Providing essential personal protective equipment, such as gumboots, gloves, and goggles, is crucial to shield them from the high solar radiation. Despite the government's efforts to provide housing facilities and financial assistance during the off-season, the salt workers continue to grapple with harsh working conditions and financial instability.

Job security is a significant motivational factor that is currently lacking in this industry, resulting in poor conditions for the salt workers of Thoothukudi. It is crucial for both the government and local non-governmental organizations to prioritize the health and socio-economic well-being of these women saltpan workers. While legal and welfare provisions exist, their implementation remains inadequate. The lack of job security is a crucial factor contributing to the poor conditions experienced by the salt workers in Thoothukudi. It is imperative that both the government and local non-governmental organizations prioritize

addressing the health and socioeconomic well-being of these women saltpan workers. Although legal and welfare provisions are in place, their implementation has been insufficient. To address these challenges, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Regular inspections and strict enforcement of social security legislations for saltpan workers are essential to ensure compliance and protect the rights of women workers.
- Conducting awareness campaigns to educate women saltpan workers about their rights and the welfare schemes available to them is crucial.
- Establishing mobile health clinics and providing access to affordable healthcare services can address the prevalent health problems among women workers.
- Ensuring the provision of clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, and restroom facilities at saltpan sites is essential to protect the health and dignity of women workers.
- Offering education and skill development programs can empower women to seek alternative employment opportunities and improve their socio-economic status.
- Strengthening social security measures such as pensions, insurance, and maternity benefits can provide a safety net for women workers and their families.
- Addressing gender discrimination and promoting equal opportunities for women in the salt industry is crucial to create a more equitable and sustainable work environment.

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