



Research Article

DETERMINANTS OF SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT AMONG WOMEN LABOUR IN SMALL-SCALE INDUSTRIES: EVIDENCE FROM CENTRAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the determinants of workplace-based social empowerment among 444 women labourers employed in small-scale industries (SSIs) in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India. Using primary survey data collected through a structured interview schedule, non-participant observation, and focused group discussions, the study examines four empowerment dimensions: voice and participation, involvement in organisational decision-making, exposure to gender-based discrimination and wage disparity, and the role of skill training in career progression. Findings show that a majority of respondents (60.8 per cent) feel empowered to voice opinions at work and that women are perceived to participate in organisational decision-making in 75.2 per cent of cases; however, 58.1 per cent report having experienced gender-based discrimination and 37.4 per cent report gender-based wage disparity, revealing a coexistence of participatory gains with persistent structural inequity. Training emerges as the strongest positive correlate of empowerment, with 94.1 per cent of respondents having received skill development opportunities and over 80 per cent reporting a moderate-to-significant career impact from training. The study concludes that empowerment in the SSI workplace is unevenly distributed across its participatory and protective dimensions, and that training access, rather than formal decision-making inclusion alone, is the most consistent lever available to employers and policymakers seeking to advance women's empowerment in this sector.

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment of women workers in industrial settings is commonly understood along two interlocking dimensions: participatory empowerment — the extent to which women can voice opinions and take part in decisions that affect their work — and protective empowerment, referring to freedom from discrimination, harassment, and unequal treatment. National data consistently show that female labour force participation in India remains well below its potential, and that participation gains recorded in aggregate statistics often mask persistent discrimination and wage inequity at the workplace level. Small-scale industries (SSIs), which absorb a substantial share of India's female industrial workforce, offer a particularly instructive setting in which to examine whether formal inclusion in workplace processes coexists with, or displaces, discriminatory practice.

This paper draws on primary data from 444 women labourers in Indore district's SSI sector to examine the determinants of social empowerment, with particular attention to the relationship between skill training, decision-making involvement, and exposure to gender-based discrimination and wage disparity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on women's economic empowerment in India distinguishes between access-based indicators (employment, income, participation in decision-making) and outcome-based indicators (freedom from discrimination, equitable treatment, control over resources). NITI Aayog's assessments of women and work in India note that rising participation indicators have not been matched by proportionate reductions in gender-based wage gaps or workplace discrimination, particularly in informal and semi-formal enterprises where regulatory oversight is thin. UN Women's global gender-gap monitoring similarly documents that formal inclusion in workplace decision processes does not, on its own, eliminate discriminatory treatment, since the two operate through largely independent organisational mechanisms. Studies of small-scale and unorganised manufacturing in India identify skill training as one of the more consistent predictors of both economic and social empowerment outcomes for women workers, since training simultaneously raises perceived competence, bargaining position, and career mobility. Comparative literature on gender and labour in the MSME sector further suggests that women's participation in decision-making is often confined to operational or team-level input rather than strategic or wage-setting decisions, a distinction that aggregate “involved in decision-making” indicators can obscure. Literature specific to Madhya Pradesh's industrial workforce similarly reports a persistent gap between women's stated sense of voice at work and their actual exposure to discriminatory treatment or unequal pay.

Research Gap

Existing studies rarely examine participatory and protective empowerment indicators concurrently within a single sample of SSI women workers, making it difficult to assess whether gains in voice and decision-making involvement are accompanied by, or independent of, reductions in discrimination and wage disparity. This study addresses that gap using matched, respondent-level survey data.

Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives, derived from the parent doctoral research: (i) to assess the extent of women labourers' participation in voice and organisational decision-making processes; (ii) to examine the prevalence of gender-based discrimination and wage disparity experienced by women labourers; (iii) to evaluate the role of skill training and development in career progression and empowerment; and (iv) to identify the relationship between social security access and perceived social empowerment.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

The study was conducted among women labourers in small-scale industrial units across Indore district, Madhya Pradesh. A descriptive, mixed-methods research design was employed, using non-probability purposive and snowball sampling. Of 500 women labourers initially approached, 444 valid responses were retained (response rate $\approx$ 88.8 per cent).

Research Design and Sampling

A descriptive research design employing a mixed-methods approach (quantitative and qualitative) was adopted. A non-probability, purposive and snowball sampling method was used to reach respondents. Of 500 women labourers initially approached, 444 valid responses were retained after data quality screening, yielding a response rate of approximately 88.8 per cent.

Data Collection

Primary data were gathered via a structured interview schedule, non-participant workplace observation, and focused group discussions (FGDs). Secondary data were drawn from government reports, labour legislation, and academic literature. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively (frequencies and percentages) in MS Excel; qualitative FGD material was analysed thematically to contextualise the quantitative patterns.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, with respondent confidentiality maintained throughout, consistent with the ethical clearance obtained for the parent doctoral study.

RESULTS

Table 1. Participatory Empowerment Indicators (N = 444, unless noted)

Indicator	Yes / Positive (%)	No / Negative (%)
Feel empowered to voice opinions (Y/N)	60.81	39.19
Involved in organisational decision-making (n=442)	75.57	24.43
Received training / skill development (n=441)	94.79	5.21

A majority of respondents report a positive sense of voice and inclusion: 60.8 per cent feel empowered to voice opinions, and 75.6 per cent perceive women as involved in organisational decision-making. Skill training access is near-universal, at 94.8 per cent.

Table 2. Degree of Voice Empowerment (Likert Scale, N = 444)

Not at all (%)	Slightly (%)	Moderately (%)	Very (%)	Extremely (%)
17.79	36.17	34.45	11.03	0.22

When measured on a graded scale rather than a binary indicator, the picture is more mixed: only 11.25 per cent report feeling very or extremely empowered to voice opinions, while the largest share (36.17 per cent) report only slight empowerment indicating that binary “yes/no” empowerment measures likely overstate the depth of participatory inclusion.

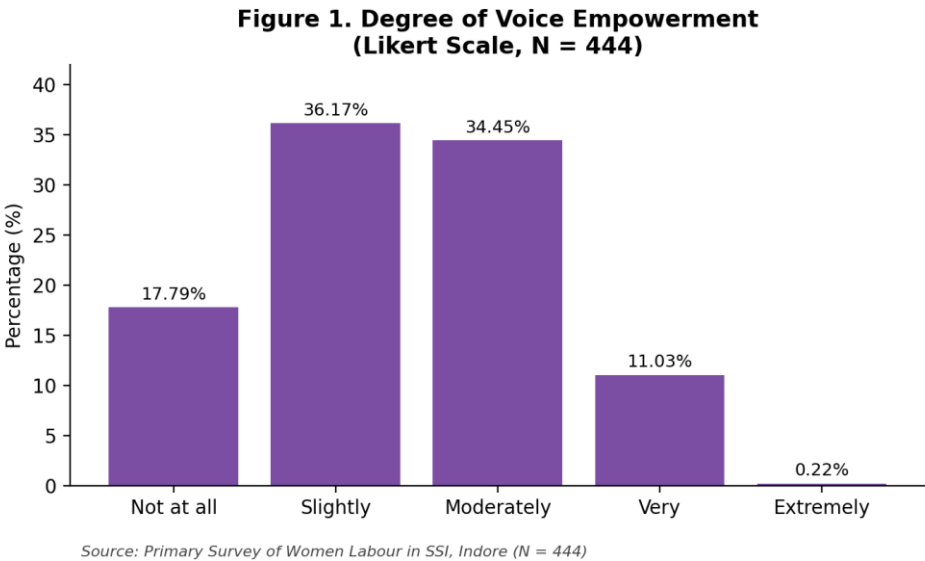


Figure 1. Degree of Voice Empowerment (Likert Scale, N = 444). Source: Primary Survey of Women Labour in SSI, Indore.

Table 3. Protective Empowerment: Discrimination and Wage Disparity (N = 444)

Indicator	Experienced (%)	Not Experienced (%)
Gender-based wage disparity	37.39	62.61
Gender-based discrimination / challenges at work (n=443)	58.24	41.76

In contrast to the largely positive participatory indicators, protective empowerment outcomes are markedly weaker: 58.2 per cent of respondents report having experienced gender-based discrimination or challenges at work, and 37.4 per cent report gender-based wage disparity — confirming that formal participatory inclusion coexists with substantial, unresolved discriminatory practice.

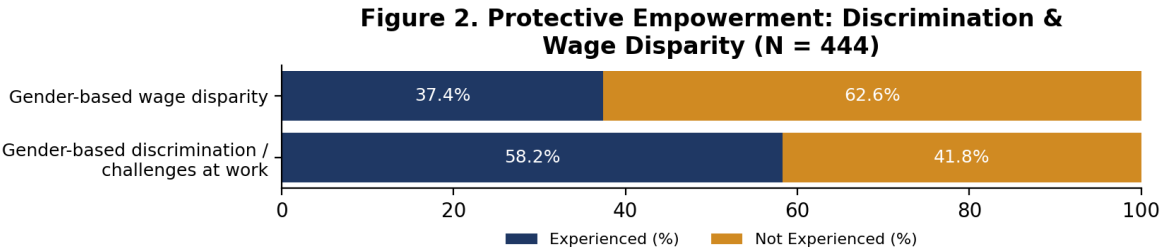
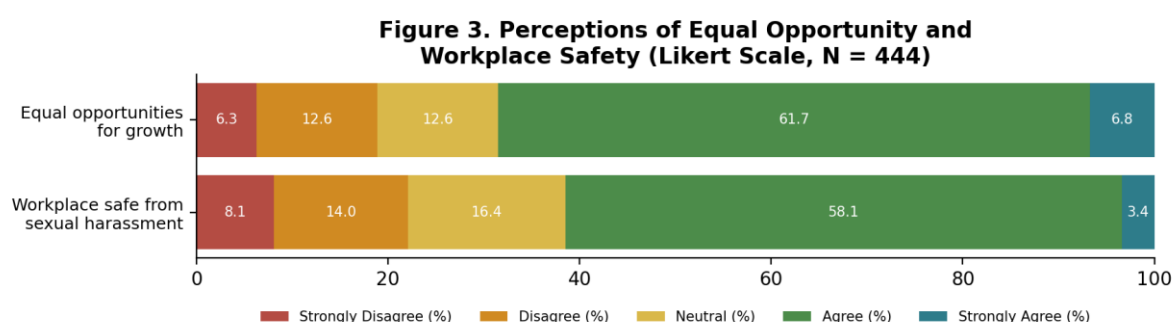


Figure 2. Protective Empowerment: Discrimination & Wage Disparity (N = 444). Source: Primary Survey of Women Labour in SSI, Indore.

Table 4. Perceptions of Equal Opportunity and Workplace Safety (Likert Scale, N = 444)

Indicator	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Equal opportunities for growth	6.31	12.61	12.61	61.71	6.76
Workplace safe from sexual harassment	8.11	13.96	16.44	58.11	3.38

Roughly two-thirds of respondents agree or strongly agree that women have equal growth opportunities (68.5 per cent) and that the workplace is safe from sexual harassment (61.5 per cent), yet close to a fifth to a third of the sample remains neutral or disagrees on each measure, indicating that positive perceptions are not uniformly shared.



Source: Primary Survey of Women Labour in SSI, Indore (N = 444)

Figure 3. Perceptions of Equal Opportunity and Workplace Safety (Likert Scale, N = 444).
Source: Primary Survey of Women Labour in SSI, Indore.

Table 5. Training Impact and Empowerment-Related Satisfaction (N = 444)

Indicator	Distribution
Impact of training on career progression	No impact 0.90% Slight 16.89% Moderate 45.94% Substantial 29.27% Significant 6.98%
Satisfaction with social empowerment initiatives	Not at all 2.02% Slightly 39.64% Moderately 43.69% Very 12.84% Extremely 1.80%
Overall satisfaction as a woman worker in the organisation	Not at all 3.15% Slightly 35.36% Moderately 49.10% Very 8.56% Extremely 3.83%

Training shows the strongest positive skew of any empowerment-related indicator in the study: 82.2 per cent of respondents report a moderate, substantial, or significant career impact from training, compared with markedly more centrally clustered distributions for satisfaction with empowerment initiatives and overall job satisfaction, both of which peak at the “moderately satisfied” category rather than higher satisfaction bands.

DISCUSSION

The results point to an empowerment profile that is participatory-positive but protection-deficient. Voice and decision-making indicators are comparatively strong in binary terms, consistent with NITI Aayog's observation that formal participation indicators for Indian women workers have improved in recent years.

However, when the same construct is measured on a graded rather than binary scale, the depth of empowerment narrows considerably — only about one in nine respondents report high voice empowerment — suggesting that binary indicators used in much aggregate labour-force reporting may overstate substantive empowerment.

More strikingly, the coexistence of high participatory scores with a 58.2 per cent discrimination-exposure rate and a 37.4 per cent wage-disparity rate supports the view, echoed in UN Women's gender-gap monitoring, that inclusion in workplace processes and freedom from discriminatory treatment are governed by largely independent organisational mechanisms rather than moving in lockstep. A workplace can register high decision-making involvement while simultaneously exposing a majority of its women workers to discriminatory treatment, and the Indore SSI data illustrate exactly this pattern.

Skill training stands out as the most consistently positive empowerment correlate identified in this study, with both near-universal access (94.8 per cent) and a strongly positive self-reported career impact (82.2 per cent moderate-to-significant). This is consistent with literature identifying training as one of the more reliable levers for improving both economic standing and self-perceived empowerment among women in small-scale manufacturing, in contrast to decision-making inclusion, which appears less closely tied to protective outcomes in this sample.

Policy Implications

Three implications follow. First, employers and policymakers should not treat participatory indicators (voice, decision-making involvement) as proxies for the absence of discrimination; the two require independent monitoring and independent interventions. Second, given training's disproportionately positive association with empowerment outcomes, expanding structured skill-development access across SSI units represents a comparatively high-return policy lever. Third, given that a majority of respondents report having experienced discrimination despite reasonably positive participatory scores, workplace grievance and anti-discrimination mechanisms in SSIs warrant strengthening independent of participation-focused interventions.

Limitations

Findings are based on a purposive, snowball sample confined to Indore district and self-reported measures of discrimination and empowerment, which may be subject to recall and social-desirability bias. The cross-sectional design also precludes causal inference regarding the direction of the relationship between training and empowerment outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Social empowerment among women labourers in Indore's small-scale industries is unevenly distributed across its participatory and protective dimensions. While a majority of women report voice in workplace matters and involvement in decision-making, a comparable or larger majority report having experienced gender-based discrimination, and over a third report wage disparity — indicating that formal inclusion has not resolved underlying structural inequity. Skill training emerges as the most consistent positive determinant of empowerment identified in this study, suggesting that training access, rather than decision-making inclusion alone, offers the most actionable lever for policymakers and employers seeking to advance meaningful, not merely nominal, empowerment for women labour in the SSI sector.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

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