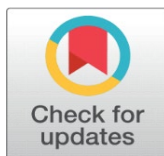


WOMEN AND WORK: DEMAND FOR LOW-PAID WORK AND MOVEMENT TO CITIES IN KERALA

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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. Apart from the reported increase in work through Kudumbaree and MGNREGA, the paper argues that the recent economic changes have created an increase in demand for low-paid work of women, contributing to this change. The paper tries to understand the nature of this demand created especially in the cities, by focusing on two low-end categories of work -salesgirls and domestic workers. The paper also tries to trace an emerging pattern of intrastate movement of women for work in the cities in these newly created job opportunities. The paper is based on primary survey, supplemented by secondary data and literature.

Keywords: Women, Work, Kerala, Salesgirls, Domestic Work

1. INTRODUCTION

The changes in Kerala economy since 1990s in terms of increasing economic growth and income inequality, the paper argues has triggered certain changes in the labour market behaviour of women in the state. The paper focuses on the demand generated for the low-paid work of women in services in recent years in Kerala with focus on salesgirls and domestic work. The paper argues that this increasing demand for women's work in low-paid work has triggered a pattern of intrastate migration.

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 pattern of international migration in the state also have direct and indirect implications on the economy in general and the labour market in particular. No doubt, these changes have created demand for several white-collar jobs (Economic Review 2021). 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. The objective of this paper is to

focus on the specific kinds of employment generated for women in the informal sector of Kerala economy, especially in the low-end categories.

From 1990s, the state has been undergoing certain economic transformation, from one characterised by low economic growth and income inequality to one marked by high economic growth and income inequality (Alhuwalia 2000). This was much in line with the national trend as a consequence of the liberalisation policies since the 1990s and globalisation. The changes in the Kerala economy coincide with the pattern of international migration, a transformation from the early days of Gulf migration to proportionately higher migration of high-skilled migrants (Sreeraj&Vakulabaranam 2016, Kannan & Hari 2020). This is likely to have an impact on the labour market as well. In this paper we explore the possible increase in demand for low-paid work of women in the urban centers of the state. for this we are focusing on salesgirls and domestic work.

The paper is based on a primary survey conducted in Kochi city in Kerala between July 2022 to April 2024. Kochi is the shopping hub for central Kerala and historically the most important commercial and economic centre, as discussed in the chapter on methodology. 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 and to ensure consistency in the findings, employees and trade unions were also interviewed. As for the case of domestic workers, primary survey was conducted among 20 households in the city. The primary survey includes detailed interviews with employers of salesgirls, domestic workers, trade unions and other knowledgeable persons. It is supplemented by secondary data sources, including newspaper advertisements and government reports.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first section deals with the context in which the demand for low-paid work of women is emerging in urban Kerala. The second 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 third section. The pattern of intrastate migration of women for work and this increase in demand is discussed in the following section. The last section summarises and concludes the discussion.

2. CONTEXTUALIZING DEMAND GENERATED FOR LOW-PAID WORK OF WOMEN IN URBAN KERALA

There are two tendencies around labour that we see in the developing world that need to be addressed to be able to understand the recent increase in demand for women's work in low-paid categories of work in Kerala. The first is around the pattern of increasing inequality across the world and developing countries in particular. Global increase in inequality has become an important theme of research for the past few decades. This is not unexpected with the expansion of the globalisation process, which has been increasingly associated with different forms of inequalities (Sassen 1994). The Indian case is no different. 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 migrationⁱⁱ. 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.

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 globalisation, 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 increased to around 47 per cent (P.I. Jajati and 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. This brings us to the second tendency with regard to the nature of growth in employment.

The economic growth that followed the liberalisation policies of 1990s in India was led by the service sector (Ahluwali 2000, Balakrishnan 2010). The same goes for Kerala too. This would imply the rise in the employment opportunities is also in the service sector. The more recent increase in the employment of women in Kerala seen in the Periodic Labour Force Surveys is in the categories of self-employment and casual labour (Kerala Economic Review 2021). But what characterises the nature of contract in these opportunities. We see the process of globalisation and economic growth, especially in developing countries, are increasingly being accompanied by the feminisation processⁱⁱⁱ and by extension, with informalisation and flexibilisation of the labour force (Standing 1989).

There are several reasons responsible for the feminisation of the labour force in low-end jobs. The fear of organised labour has always been a threat to employers as this could stand in the way of profit maximisation. They have tried to remedy this by replacing the organised male workforce with women who are 'usually unorganised'. The narrative of 'Oriental docility' plays a role in this change. The idea of 'Oriental docility' originates from the understanding that strong patriarchal relations in the 'Orient' make women docile. This narrative is enforced to maintain control over women and to avoid any deviation from the norm (Lyotard 1989). 'Oriental docility' ticks all the boxes. It is expected to offer employers cheap labour who are willing to work under substandard working conditions and are unlikely to stand up for their rights (Barbezat 1993, Lim 1984, Standing 1989). The feminisation of many sectors, for instance, the garment manufacturing units in East Asia, Bangladesh and India, has followed this rationale (Kabeer 2001, Chakravarty 2007). Similarly, in the retail sector in Kerala also, the same reasoning was employed in hiring women over men (Muyarath&Roopak 2018), which we will look at in detail in the following section.

With this short interlude that contextualises our study, we enter the main focus of the chapter – the job opportunities created for women in low-end work directly and indirectly based on the demand generated by those at the higher end of the inequality. We begin the analysis with the employment opportunities for women in as salesgirls.

3. 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.

Apart from its influence in reviving the stagnant domestic economy and keeping income inequality low, the Gulf migration also influenced consumption behaviour in the state (Krishnaji 2007, Oommen 2010, Muyarath&Roopak 2007, Karinkurayil 2023). The 'foreign goods' available in the households of the Gulf migrants served as a mark of status for the household members and formed aspirations among the minds of non-migrant households (Karinkurayil 2023).^{iv} With the liberalisation policies that came in the early 1990s, as the market opened for the inflow of foreign goods, the goods that were once seen only among migrant households started being seen in non-migrant households as well. This mainly included the households of the elite and the middle-classes. Consumption as a status symbol started becoming the norm among these classes in Kerala. This has further been aggravated in the context of increasing globalisation around the same time. With time, it has even furthered to an extent where the act of consumption increasingly resonates with the idea of 'enjoying life' beyond the notion of consumption as a status symbol (Palackal 2011, Mannathukkaren 2023). The expansion of retail sector in Kerala needs to be looked at in this context.

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).^v There is a decline in the number of shops registered, but the number of employees have consistently increased over the years. This shows there is an increasing employment generation in the retail sector. As for the case of Kochi city where the primary survey was conducted, the number of shops and employees registered under the Act has consistently increased.

To understand the nature of demand for women's work in low-paid work that cannot be captured in large data-generating exercises, we looked at the advertisements for job openings in one of the popular newspaper advertisements,

MalayalaManorama for the years 1985 and 2019. Advertisements for salesgirls were a major category in the newspapers, sometimes single advertisements of big shops covering half a page, advertising multiple vacancies for salesgirls. The majority of the advertisements for salesgirls were placed by retail textile shops. The interviews with trade unions in the retail sector revealed that these advertisements cover only a fraction of the openings for salesgirls. Therefore, we decided to understand the nature and magnitude of demand for salesgirls from the employers.

'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. In modern industrial countries, the feminisation of the retail sector happened in the 1920s, and it was considered a success of the increasing capitalist consumerism (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, in line with the national trend. This further accelerated the process of feminisation of the retail sector in the state (Muyarath&Roopak 2018).

Though the term 'salesgirls' is of popular usage, the nature and kind of work they do vary based on the size and kind of shop that employs them. Therefore, to understand the demand for salesgirls we need to look at the different kinds of shops. Based on the categorisation by The Kerala Shops and Commercial Establishment Act 1960^{vi}, in Kochi, we selected small and big retail textile shops, one from each category, that are clearly distinct in size and can bring out the contrasting features of the nature of demand for salesgirls in them.

In the following discussion, we highlight some of the important observations from our primary survey on the demand for salesgirls. 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'. Similar findings can be found in other research (Muyarath&Roopak 2018). 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'.

Employers look for the 'feminine' quality of women that can help in sales. One common observation in big shops was salesgirls stationed at the entrance of the shop to greet the customers. Second, women in saree section who are assigned to drape the sarees on display, on themselves and on customers. Both these categories of women were, in general, young, fair-skin-toned and lean. In addition to 'patience', the employer also looks for certain feminine physical attributes in salesgirls, though they may not explicitly state. In a recent study on salesgirls in Kerala, Muyarath and Roopak (2018) have also observed the preference of large textile shops for the 'femininity' of Kerala women. They have been described to be functioning as 'mannequins' to promote business by making the shops more attractive. Many advertisements in the Malayalam newspapers call for 'smart and young girls' to apply for salesgirls positions in the retail sector.

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 to explore other possible reasons. 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. For instance, a recent trend we see among retail shops, small and big is the increasing online presence for marketing their products, for which they depend on the salesgirls for showcasing and promoting the products.

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. Even their monthly salaries, for that matter, range from Rs 7,000 – 15,000, which does not reflect the overtime or additional tasks they are required to perform. The employers realise that women employees could be paid lower wages, and at the same time, could also avoid labour problems usually associated with male employees. This falls close to the argument of 'oriental docility' that attributed the submissiveness of women in the Orient being the preferred attribute for employers; especially when employers look for cheap labour who are willing to work under substandard working conditions and are unlikely to stand up for their rights (Barbezat 1993, Lim 1984, Standing 1989).

4. 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 urban affluence, 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 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
Tamil Nadu	165
Karnataka	156
Andhra Pradesh	100
India	170

Source: NSS report No 554

The interviews with 20 households currently employing 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, for a significant section who can afford to do so. We have already seen the increase in urban affluence in Kerala, as noted in Table 1. 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, Chakravarty & Nayak 2022). As for the case of elderly care is concerned, elderly care in India hugely depends on family and/or domestic help (Dey 2017). 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.

To cater to this demand, we see that live-in domestics and daily commuting domestics are two major categories of domestic work. Between them we see differences in the nature of demand, terms of contract and modes of recruitment. To better bring these two categories under better light, the following discussion on domestic workers has been divided into two parts based on these categories.

In general, the demand for live-in domestics is created in households where there is a need for full-time help with childcare or elderly care in particular. In the context of Kerala, based on our current primary survey it has been found that 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, 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. This is not to say that the demand for live-in domestics for childcare is less. From the primary survey, it has been found that this demand is created mostly by Malayalis residing outside of Kerala. Compared to the former, the demand for live-in domestics for childcare is relatively short-term. This usually involves post-partum care of mother and child for a couple of months, or until alternative care arrangements are made for the childcare in the migrant state or country. With the increase in daycare facilities and creche for children of those in the upper middle class and upper-class households, the pressure to employ full-time live-in domestic workers for childcare is not so profound among Malayali households living in Kerala. Then again, these are households in the urban areas that may live in rented or owned small apartments. This creates a space constraint and privacy concern for employing a full-time domestic worker in smaller living arrangements.

For recruiting live-in domestic workers, households largely depend on domestic service agencies, especially in cases of elderly and patient care. The reason behind this are two – one, the agency can be held accountable if things go wrong, and therefore the trust on the domestic worker is based on the assurance given by the agency. This is especially the case when it involves taking care of elderly in the absence of the children to supervise care. Second, in the event that the domestic worker takes leave, the agency immediately replaces the person with another until the other person comes back. The agency for this service charges a monthly rate of around Rs 2000 from the household. In many cases, the domestic worker's salary is made through the agency. Within live-in domestic workers, the pay differs based on the qualifications and responsibilities of the domestic worker.

These women who are live-in domestic workers, whether with or without professional training, are mostly referred to as home nurses as they prefer to be. This is considered as better accepted title than domestic worker. All these categories of domestic workers are also at least initially are recruited through agencies. However, in many of the households interviewed, once the rapport is established between the employer and the domestic workers, they try to eliminate the agency from the equation. Instead, they pay half of what was paid to the agency as the increased salary to the domestic worker.

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 urbanisation 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 like elsewhere. It is also difficult to determine the average wages of daily commuting domestics. Based on differences in demand and cost of living, the average wages of domestic workers vary between districts and rural to urban areas. On an average, in a city like Kochi, a domestic worker earns around Rs 600-800 a day. 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. For instance, for the same task of cleaning indoors and outdoors, a person may be called once or twice by one employer and by other employers on the remaining days of the week. This is very common in metropolitan cities like Delhi where domestics work in multiple households within the same region.

5. MOVEMENT OF WOMEN FOR WORK IN THE CITY

Now that we have looked at the increasing demand and the nature of it for salesgirls and domestic workers in the urban centres of Kerala, we will look at some tendencies this demand has created around the women's movement for work. In the case of salesgirls, based on the size of the operation of the shop, the demand also varies. For small shops, the demand is for women who can commute daily for work from nearby regions. The preference for employees from nearby areas is a strategic decision for many small shop employers, as confirmed by the different trade unions. In the primary survey, a small shop owner revealed that the only reason for employing staff from nearby areas is that he cannot afford accommodation expenses for employees like the big shops. He says this is the only reason he prefers women from the nearby region. The employees he has currently and in the past were recruited through recommendations or by pasting the 'salesgirls wanted' posters near the shop. The interviews with the different trade unions revealed that these recruitment techniques are employed by many small shop owners like him. The employer also complained that employing women from nearby areas is a 'loss' for him. In his opinion, women who come from nearby areas 'make excuses' and try to leave early. They lack the 'commitment' of women working in big shops willing to stay longer because they have hostel facilities.

As far as the big shops are concerned, they have both daily commuting staff as well as staff from other districts. The big shops like textile shops and supermarkets offer accommodation facilities to the women working there. The preference for women from far away regions of the state arises from the need to avoid the chances of worker's organisations. The employers find it easier to work with staff who do not have any affiliations or ties to the region of employment. They find it easier to control the movement and interactions of women from far away regions. but the excuses they use for this control are creative. Most of these women in the hostels are young women, many of them unmarried. The tendency to exercise certain control over their movement and interactions are rationalised as 'noble intervention' on the part of the employer to 'protect young women' who are 'gullible of the tricks of vile men'.

As for the case of domestic workers, unlike big cities like Delhi, where the daily commuting domestics live in working-class localities within a short radius from the place of employment, in Kerala, the majority of those working in the cities as domestic workers travel longer distances. These distances are usually covered by a combination of buses, shared autos or on foot. But most of them come from rural areas within the same or neighbouring district. We find the morning buses that comes to Kochi city, overcrowded by working women. But it is difficult to identify what category of work they are

engaged in unless you know someone among them. Unlike the old stereotypical domestic worker image in Kerala who comes to work in lungi and blouse, it is hard to differentiate the modern-day domestic worker from an office-going working woman. As for the case of live-in domestics, most of them come from different districts, from distances that cannot be travelled to and from on the same day of work. When the agencies recruit and assign the workers, in most cases, they make it a point not to match the residence of the domestic worker with their employer. This is again done with the same rationale of 'control' as the case of big shop employers.

6. CONCLUSION

The analysis offered in this paper brings to light the demand created for low-end work of women in the informal sector in recent years. In the categories explored of domestic workers and salesgirls, we find several nuances need to be explored in detail with a large-scale data, that do not get covered in the official data generating exercises. With an absence of adequate data on the number of women employed in the different low-end jobs due to underreporting and non-enumeration, it can be difficult to make sense of magnitude of the demand created. There is a need to pay better attention to their limitations to formulate policies that can safeguard these informal sector workers.

In the end, what remains common among all the different categories of domestic workers and salesgirls is the increase in demand for these categories in recent years in the context of increasing economic growth and income inequality in the state. With the increasing feminisation of low-end jobs in the state, employers actively try to find ways to control the movement and interactions of employees to avoid possible unionisations, especially when many of these employers have a chance of persecution with numerous labour law violations.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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

ⁱⁱThe 'Gulf migration' of low skilled migration of men from relatively poorer agricultural households in the 1970s played a significant role in reviving the stagnant domestic economy and keeping inequality low (Nair 1991, Krishnaji 2007, Zachariah & Rajan 2012; Kannan & Hari 2020).

ⁱⁱⁱ "Feminization arises because available employment and labour options tend increasingly to characterize activities associated, rightly or wrongly, with women and because the pattern of employment tends to result in an increasing proportion of women occupying the jobs" (Standing 1999).

^{iv}These included consumer goods like transistor radios, watches, leather shoes, etc. These were items that were considered of superior quality and were not available in the local markets.

^vThe 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 1960.

^{vi}Small shop has no or not more than five employees; medium with six to twenty and big as shops and establishments with more than twenty employees (Kerala Shop and Commercial Establishment Act 1960).

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