

An Evaluation Of Pay Gap On The Basis Of Gender Discrimination In The Rural Industries Of Hojai District

K.Mohima Singha

Research Scholar, Rabindranath Tagore University

Dr. Barnali Hazarika

Assistant Professor, Rabindranath Tagore University

Abstract

Gender equality refers to a state in which individuals of all genders have equal access to opportunities, resources, and rights, without discrimination. Where every gender identities have the same opportunities in education, employment, healthcare, decision-making, and socio-political participation. Gender equality in economic participation remains a critical challenge in rural industries, where causes like traditional norms and structural barriers often perpetuate income disparities between men and women. The Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) of the United Nations emphasizes achieving gender equality, ensuring equal pay for equal work. The research is done to evaluate gender gap in payment for equal work in the rural industries of Hojai district by examining wage differences, employment opportunities, and socio-economic factors that influence earnings. It also explores the issues contributing to income inequality, including limited access to economic opportunities, and the undervaluation of women's labour.

***Keywords:** rural industries, informal sector, unequal pay, dualism in labour market*

Introduction

Gender equality is a fundamental pillar of social and economic development, ensuring that individuals, regardless of gender, have equal access to opportunities and resources. The Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) advocates for gender equality and equal pay for equal work,. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive understanding of the wage gap, employment patterns, and socio-economic factors influencing earnings in rural industries. Rural labour markets continue to exhibit significant disparities. The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data indicates that rural women earn 20–30% less than their male counterparts (Deshpande, 2011). Wage disparities are more acute in agricultural and informal sectors. Also in the rural areas, deep-rooted traditional norms often hinder women's economic participation, leading to persistent income disparities.

Hojai, was declared a district in Assam in the year 2016. However, there are many rural areas in the district that need to develop its socio-economic status. The district has many key industries like;

bamboo and cane work, agarwood, hand-loom and handicraft and brick kiln manufacturing industries, among others where a large number of both men and women participate for their economic well-being. Hojai is no exception in terms of unequal pay particularly prevalent in the rural industries, where informal employment disproportionately affects earnings. The study therefore, makes an attempt to examine the extent of gender-based income disparities in Hojai's rural industries, evaluating key determinants that contribute to pay gap.

The primary objective of the study is to analyze the wage gap between men and women employed in the rural industries of the district. However only two industries; agarwood and Brick kiln industries have been considered on purpose for the study due to its economic significance and high labour participation irrespective of gender.

The research aims to determine if there is any gender biased wage disparity in these two industries. It also makes an attempt to identify the underlying causes of these disparities. The study explores factors such as work segregation, differences in skill recognition, the informal nature of employment, and social barriers that may contribute to unequal pay.

Methodology

The study is both analytical and descriptive in nature, utilizing both primary and secondary data. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The collected data were analyzed using MS Excel. For the study, we have determined the sample sizes for both the agarwood and brick kiln industries based on relevant statistical considerations. In the case of the agarwood industry, the sample size is 381 workers. The selection is guided by the estimated total number of agarwood workers in Assam, which is approximately 50,000, as reported by Telegram India. According to the Krejcie and Morgan sample size determination table, a population of the magnitude requires a minimum sample size of 381 for statistically significant results. Therefore, we have adhered to the standard to ensure that our findings accurately represent the workforce dynamics within the agarwood industry. However, in the case of the brick kiln industry, the exact number of workers in Hojai district is not readily available. But there are 28 registered brick kiln industries in Hojai district. According to the Krejcie and Morgan sampling table, when the population size is 28, the required sample size is also 28. Therefore, all 28 registered brick kiln industries have been included in the study as the sample. It was found that 12 industries are located in the Dhalpukhuri Block, 6 in the Lanka Revenue Circle, 7 in Lumding, 2 in Binakandi, and 1 in Jamunamukh.

Objectives of the study

- i. To examine if there is wage disparity between men and women workers in the agarwood and brick kiln industries
- ii. To determine the causes responsible for wage gap

Significance of the study

A study on wage gap on the basis of gender becomes important due to the mass participation of both women and men in these rural industries. Studying the existence of an income gap between men and women in Hojai district is also significant because it sheds light on gender-based economic disparities in rural industries, which are crucial for the region's economy. Wage inequality not only affects women's financial independence but also results in broader socio-economic inequalities, limiting their access to education, healthcare, and decision-making opportunities. In industries like agarwood and brick kilns, where informal employment is prevalent, women often face lower wages, fewer opportunities for skill development, leading to persistent economic disadvantages. Understanding these disparities is essential for identifying the root causes of wage gaps, lack of labour protections, and cultural biases. Additionally, addressing gender pay disparities aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which advocates for equal pay for equal work and economic empowerment of women. Insights from the study can inform policymakers, industry stakeholders, and labour organizations, facilitating targeted interventions to ensure fair wages and promote inclusive economic growth. . By drawing attention to these problems, the study advances the conversation about economic justice and gender equality in rural India, which eventually helps to raise living standards and promote social justice in the Hojai

Literature review

Becker's (1957) seminal work, *The Economics of Discrimination*, provides a theoretical foundation to understand how prejudicial attitude against women can influence labor market outcomes. It explains how employers or institutions may irrationally avoid hiring or underpay women, even at the cost of economic inefficiency. Feminist economic theories (Elson & Cagatay, 2000) stress the undervaluation of women's work in both productive and reproductive roles. These frameworks have been applied globally and within South Asian contexts to understand rural labour dynamics. Studies highlight that rural women often work in low-paid, informal, or home-based sectors (Desai & Jain, 2011). Despite their contribution to agriculture and small-scale industries, they receive less pay than male counterparts due to limited bargaining power, illiteracy, and social constraints (Sudarshan & Bhattacharya, 2009). This is particularly true in sectors like handloom, bamboo crafts, and food processing which are prominent in various parts of Assam. Patriarchal norms, restricted mobility, lack of formal education, and under-representation in skilled roles have been repeatedly cited as barriers for rural women earning equitable wages (Kabeer, 2008; Neetha, 2010). These structural inequalities are often internalized and reproduced through informal labour markets, limiting wage negotiations. Baruah (2004) explores the gendered dimensions of wage labour in Assam's tea plantations, uncovering systemic discrimination and exploitation faced by female workers. Women are often relegated to low-paying, labor-intensive jobs with little scope for upward mobility. This research underscores the structural constraints faced by women in traditional employment sectors and highlights the importance of alternative empowerment models that offer greater autonomy and flexibility.

The process of extracting oil from agarwood

The process of making oil perfume from agarwood extraction involves several meticulous steps to ensure high-quality oud oil. First, infected *Aquilaria* trees, which contain the resin responsible for the fragrance, are carefully selected. The infected heartwood is harvested, cleaned, and cut into small chips or powdered to facilitate extraction. These wood chips are then soaked in water for 10–30 days to soften the fibers and promote fermentation, which helps break down the wood structure. Next, the softened wood undergoes steam distillation, where steam passes through the wood, carrying the resinous oil with it. The vapor is then condensed, and the oil separates naturally from the water. The extracted oil is carefully collected and aged for several months to enhance its depth and richness. It is then filtered to remove any impurities, ensuring a pure and refined product. The pure agarwood oil can be used directly as a natural perfume or blended with carrier oils and other essential oils to create high-end perfumes. Alcohol or fixatives may also be added to adjust the strength and longevity of the fragrance.

The agarwood industry is largely male-dominated, particularly in tasks involving tree harvesting, wood processing, and oil extraction. These processes require physical labour, specialized skills, and technical knowledge, which are traditionally assigned to men. Women, if involved, are typically engaged in lighter tasks such as sorting, cleaning, or packaging, which are often lower-paying roles. The wage disparity in the industry is also influenced by socio-cultural norms that limit women's participation in labour-intensive and skilled occupations. Additionally, the informal nature of the industry, further restrict women from advancing into higher-paying roles.

Gender biased work segregation

In the brick kiln industry, workers are organized into different roles, each contributing to the overall functioning of the production process. At the top of the hierarchy is the **manager**, who oversees the entire operation, ensuring smooth coordination from production to distribution. Assisting in financial matters is the **accountant**, responsible for estimating bills, managing wages, and handling all financial transactions. The *sardar*, also known as the head *mistri*, plays a crucial role in supervising labourers and ensuring that tasks are carried out efficiently.

Among the key workers is the *pathera*, who is responsible for shaping the raw bricks from mud, a labour-intensive task requiring precision. Once the bricks are shaped, the **cycle party** transports these raw, or *kachcha*, bricks to the *miyan*, the designated chimney area where the bricks undergo the firing process. After that, the **coalman** spreads *coal* over the stacked *kachcha* bricks inside the *miyan* to ensure they are properly baked. The controlled heating process transforms them into durable, fully prepared bricks. Finally, the **loader** plays a vital role in the final stage by carefully loading the finished bricks onto trucks for transportation and sale.

Out of these many roles, women are primarily engaged in two tasks: they either work as *patheras*, shaping the bricks, or carry the shaped bricks to the *miyan*. They are generally excluded from roles such as accountant, *sardar* (head *mistri*), and coalman, which involve supervisory or technical responsibilities.

Each of these roles is integral to the brick kiln industry, contributing to a well-coordinated system of production. The structured division of labour ensures efficiency and productivity, though it is often marked by physically demanding work conditions. Understanding these roles helps in assessing wage structures, labour conditions, and gender-based disparities within the industry.

Findings : Table 1: Wages of female and male workers in the agarwood industry

GENDER	AVERAGE MONTHLY INCOME
FEMALE	7975
MALE	13672

Source: Sample survey

Table 1 shows the average monthly income that a female and male worker in the agarwood industry earns. The average monthly income for female workers is found to be Rs. 7975 and Rs. 13672 as average monthly income for males. A massive wage rate disparity can be seen from the results obtained. The average male wage was found to be 71% more than that of a female worker.

In the case of women workers, it was observed that for the same job, women were paid differently. Upon inquiry, it was revealed that this pay disparity stemmed from the amount of time women could dedicate to their work—some could devote more time, while others could devote less. Further investigation revealed that this difference was rooted in the flexibility of gender roles within households. Women from households with fixed gender roles were unable to commit more time to paid work because they were expected to perform domestic tasks like washing, cleaning, cooking, and fetching water, which were considered their fixed responsibilities. As a result, these women had limited time for paid employment and, consequently, earned less. In contrast, women from households with flexible gender roles, where men also participated in domestic chores, were able to dedicate more time to paid work, leading to higher earnings. This highlights that income gap exists not only between men and women but also among women themselves, emphasizing the need for a shift in traditional gender roles to ensure equal opportunities and wages for all women.

There is no significant wage gap at first glance in the brick kiln industry, as both men and women are paid 80 paisa for molding a brick. Payment is based on the number of bricks produced rather than a fixed daily or monthly wage. However, this does not tell the full story. There are several factors that contribute to gender-based disparities. Women often have to juggle household chores

before coming to work, which affects their overall working hours and productivity. It was also observed that the hindrances in the way of women's labour force participation such as disproportionate burden of children on the mother, less education of women, cultural background does not support women to work in the labour market. Additionally, there is a bias among brick kiln owners, who tend to hire male workers over women. Even when women are hired, both the owners and the workers are aware that women may not be as physically capable of handling the same workload as men. As a result, owners sometimes offer lower wages to female workers, and in their struggle to make ends meet, women may accept these lower wages out of necessity. Gender equality does not just mean equal pay for equal work, it also means equal work opportunities. The owner of the brick industry often prefers male workers over female because of the male workers' ability to work for more hours and that too efficiently in order to meet the demand for bricks. It was found that women in families with a more fixed gender role mindset face greater work family conflict and women with families of growth gender role mindset significantly face reduced work family conflict. This highlights that the gender wage gap isn't just about equal pay for equal work, but about the unequal conditions and perceptions surrounding women's labour.

Suggestions

To address the gender wage gap in rural industries like those in Hojai, several low-cost and quickly implementable measures can be introduced at the local level. Firstly, displaying task-wise wage rates publicly at worksites such as brick kilns and agarwood units can increase transparency and awareness among workers. Organizing brief wage awareness sessions during SHG meetings or village gatherings can help women understand their rights and current minimum wage standards. Employers should be encouraged to issue simple wage slips in women's names to ensure recognition of their labour and to build wage histories useful for accessing credit or government benefits. Promoting shared roles between men and women in non-technical tasks can gradually reduce work segregation and improve wage equity. Women should receive basic guidance on how to track their work, negotiate wages, and request direct payment, particularly in family-based labour settings like brick kilns. Women bearing children under the age of 5 or 6 often face barriers to entering the workforce. Therefore, workplaces should provide crèche facilities to support their participation. Additionally, informal mapping of gender-based task divisions and payment gaps by SHG leaders can generate grassroots evidence to support local advocacy efforts. These measures, though simple, can play a powerful role in narrowing the wage gap and promoting gender-inclusive growth in rural industries.

Conclusion

While a clear wage difference could be seen between men and women workers of the agarwood industry, difference in daily wage could be seen indirectly in case of the brick kiln industry. The cause of the wage difference being fixed gender roles of the society. SDG 5 emphasizes gender equality, which means that men and women should be given equal opportunities to perform a job.

However, true equality goes beyond equal pay for equal work. Factors like physical strength, additional household responsibilities for women, and unequal access to resources often create disparities, even when the pay rate is the same. Therefore, addressing wage inequality requires not only policy-level changes but also a transformation in societal attitudes. Only then can sustainable and inclusive growth be achieved.

References

Ahmed, S. (2021). Women empowerment through SHGs in Hojai district of Assam. *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research*, 6(10), 2731–2745.

BBaruah, B. (2004). Earning their keep: Women and wage labour in tea plantations of Assam. *International Journal of Social Economics*, 31(3), 272–286. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03068290410518277>

Becker, G. S. (1957). *The economics of discrimination*. University of Chicago Press.

Das, J. (2022). Rural development and women participation in Assam: A study with reference to Hojai district. *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 9(2), 88–101.

Desai, S., & Jain, D. (2011). Maternal employment and child schooling in India: The role of job quality and rural employment schemes. *World Development*, 39(9), 1616–1629. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2011.02.005>

Elson, D., & Cagatay, N. (2000). The social content of macroeconomic policies. *World Development*, 28(7), 1347–1364. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(00\)00021-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(00)00021-8)

Kabeer, N. (2008). Paid work, women's empowerment and gender justice: Critical pathways of social change. *Pathways Working Paper*. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/8168>

Neetha, N. (2010). Minimum wages and women workers. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(43), 28–31.

Sudarshan, R., & Bhattacharya, S. (2009). Through the magnifying glass: Women's work and labour force participation in urban Delhi. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(48), 59–66

Deshpande, A. (2011). *The grammar of caste: Economic discrimination in contemporary India*. Oxford University Press.