



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND COMMERCE [IJSSC]



Achieving Sustainable Development Goals through Decent Work: Poverty and Gender Inequality among Women Leather Workers in Ambur Taluk, Tamil Nadu

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Article History

Volume:2, Issue:3, 2025

Received: 25th December 2025

Accepted: 28th December 2025

Published:30th December 2025.



Abstract: Women workers play a vital role in India's leather industry, particularly in Ambur Taluk of Tirupathur District, Tamil Nadu, which is a major centre for leather production and exports. Despite their significant contribution, women leather workers continue to experience poverty, insecure employment, poor working conditions, and gender-based inequality. This paper examines the status, survival strategies, and contemporary predicament of women workers in the leather industry within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study focuses on SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Using primary data collected from women workers and supported by secondary sources, the paper analyses income levels, employment patterns, working conditions, access to social security, health issues, and work-life balance. The findings reveal that informal employment, low wages, and weak implementation of labour welfare measures perpetuate poverty and inequality. The study concludes that achieving SDGs requires formalisation of employment, fair wages, improved workplace safety, and effective implementation of social protection schemes for women leather workers.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; Women Workers; Leather Industry; Poverty; Gender Inequality; Decent Work

Author's Citation: C.Saddam Ahmed Kabeer and G.Yoganandham., Achieving Sustainable Development Goals through Decent Work: Poverty and Gender Inequality among Women Leather Workers in Ambur Taluk, Tamil Nadu IJSSC.Vol.2.(3): 2025,PP: 65-69, <https://doi.org/10.64906/IJSSC.2025.02.03.65>

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, represent a global commitment to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality, and promote inclusive and sustainable development by 2030. Among the 17 SDGs, SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) are closely interrelated and particularly relevant to the conditions of women workers in labour-intensive industries. The leather industry is one of India's oldest and most important manufacturing sectors and contributes significantly to employment generation and export earnings. Tamil Nadu is a major hub of leather production in India, and Ambur Taluk in Tirupathur District is internationally recognised for its concentration of tanneries, footwear manufacturing units, and leather goods industries. Women workers constitute a substantial share of the workforce in these units and are predominantly employed in operations such as stitching, cutting, finishing, polishing, and packing. Despite their significant contribution to industrial production, women leather workers remain economically vulnerable. They face problems such as low wages, informal employment, job insecurity, occupational health hazards, lack of social security, and gender based discrimination. These conditions undermine the objectives of sustainable development and highlight the gap between policy commitments and actual implementation. This study seeks to analyse the socio-economic status, survival strategies, and contemporary predicament of women leather workers in Ambur Taluk within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals.

2. Review of Literature

Several studies have examined the conditions of women workers in labour-intensive industries in India. Unni (2015) highlights that women are disproportionately concentrated in informal and low-paid segments of manufacturing industries, including leather. Informal employment, absence of written contracts, and lack of social security benefits expose women workers to economic vulnerability. The International Labour Organization (2018) reports persistent gender wage gaps across industries and emphasises the importance of decent work in achieving inclusive growth. Studies on gender and labour markets reveal that women workers face occupational segregation and limited opportunities for skill upgrading and career advancement. Sen (1999) argues that poverty should be understood as capability deprivation rather than merely income deprivation. From this perspective, lack of access to education, health care, and social protection significantly affects women workers' well-being. Literature on the Sustainable Development Goals stresses that achieving SDGs requires addressing structural inequalities in labour markets and ensuring gender equality and decent work (United Nations, 2015). However, micro-level studies linking SDGs with women workers in the leather industry, particularly in Ambur Taluk, remain limited. This study attempts to fill this research gap.

3. Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To analyse the socio-economic status of women workers in leather industries of Ambu Taluk.
2. To examine the nature of employment and working conditions of women leather workers.
3. To assess the extent of poverty and inequality among women workers.
4. To study the survival strategies adopted by women leather workers.
5. To evaluate the relevance of Sustainable Development Goals in addressing the problems of women leather workers.

4. Research Hypotheses

The study is guided by the following hypotheses:

1. Informal employment significantly contributes to poverty among women leather workers.
2. Gender-based wage discrimination increases inequality in the leather industry.
3. Poor working conditions adversely affect the health and productivity of women workers.
4. Limited access to social security schemes increases economic vulnerability among women leather workers.
5. Effective implementation of SDG-oriented policies can improve the socio-economic status of women leather workers.

5. Methodology

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected from women workers employed in leather industries in Ambur Taluk using a structured interview schedule. The interview schedule covered aspects such as socioeconomic background, employment status, income, working conditions, health issues, and access to welfare schemes. Secondary data were collected from books, academic journals, government publications, labour department reports, and United Nations documents related to the Sustainable Development Goals. A random sampling method was adopted to select respondents. The collected data were analysed using percentage analysis, descriptive statistics, and qualitative interpretation.

6. Socio-Economic Status of Women Leather Workers

The socio-economic profile of women leather workers in Ambur Taluk indicates that a majority of them belong to economically weaker sections and socially marginalised communities. Educational attainment among women workers is generally low, with many having completed only primary or secondary education. Low educational levels restrict their access to skilled jobs and better wages. Most women workers are employed on a temporary, casual, or contract basis. Written employment contracts are rare, and job security is minimal. Monthly income levels are low and often insufficient to meet household needs. In addition to paid work, women workers are responsible for household chores and caregiving, resulting in a double burden of work.

7. Poverty and Survival Strategies

Low and irregular income compels women leather workers to adopt various survival strategies. These include borrowing from self-help groups, cooperative societies, and private moneylenders; working overtime or in multiple units; and reducing expenditure on food, health, and education. Such coping mechanisms indicate the presence of chronic poverty and economic insecurity among women workers. The persistence of poverty among women leather workers reflects the failure to achieve SDG 1 (No Poverty) at the grassroots level.

8. Gender Inequality and Working Conditions

Gender inequality in the leather industry manifests in multiple forms. Women workers are often paid lower wages than men for similar work. They have limited opportunities for promotion and skill development and are underrepresented in trade unions and decision making bodies. Working conditions in many leather units are poor. Women workers are exposed to chemical substances, dust, and fumes, leading to health problems such as respiratory disorders, skin diseases, and musculoskeletal issues. Inadequate safety measures and lack of health facilities violate the principles of decent work outlined in SDG 8.

9. Sustainable Development Goals and Women Leather Workers

The conditions of women leather workers in Ambur Taluk reveal significant gaps between SDG commitments and actual outcomes. SDG 1 aims to eradicate poverty, yet low wages and insecure employment keep women workers economically vulnerable. SDG 5 seeks to achieve gender equality, but wage discrimination and unequal treatment persist. SDG 8 emphasises decent work, which remains largely absent in informal leather units. SDG 10 focuses on reducing inequalities, yet women workers continue to face economic and social marginalisation.

10. Findings

The major findings of the study are:

- Women workers play a crucial role in the leather industry but remain economically marginalised.
- Poverty among women leather workers is multidimensional and persistent.
- Gender-based discrimination exists in wages, job security, and access to benefits.
- Occupational health hazards and poor working conditions adversely affect women workers.
- Inadequate implementation of labour laws and welfare schemes worsens women workers' conditions.

11. Suggestions

Based on the findings, the study suggests the following measures:

1. Ensuring equal pay for equal work for women leather workers.
2. Formalising employment and providing written contracts and job security.
3. Improving workplace safety, health facilities, and working conditions.
4. Strengthening awareness and access to social security and welfare schemes.

5. Promoting skill development and gender-sensitive labour policies.

12. Conclusion

The study concludes that women workers in the leather industries of Ambur Taluk remain trapped in poverty and inequality despite their significant contribution to industrial production. Achieving Sustainable Development Goals requires more than policy declarations; it demands effective implementation of labour laws, gender-sensitive interventions, and inclusive development strategies. Empowering women leather workers through decent work and social protection is essential for reducing poverty, bridging inequality, and promoting sustainable development.

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