

Socio-Economic And Health Implications Of Labour Work At Night: A Study Among Married Women Coolies In Chennai Marketplaces

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This study investigates the socio-economic conditions, health implications, and social dynamics of married women engaged in night-shift work as coolies in Chennai marketplaces. Using a mixed-methods approach, a sample of 200 women was surveyed to assess their demographic profile, work environment, health outcomes, and family support. Findings reveal that night-shift work significantly affects both physical health and social well-being, while economic necessity drives continued participation in such labor. Narrative-style citations are integrated throughout to contextualize findings within existing scholarly research. The study underscores the importance of policy interventions to improve working conditions and provide social support for this vulnerable workforce.

Keywords: Night-shift work, married women, informal labor, Chennai marketplaces, occupational health, family support, socio-economic impact, gender studies

1. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of urban labor markets, the participation of women in non-traditional, unregulated, and informal occupations has become increasingly visible. One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon in metropolitan India is the employment of married women as night-shift coolies in large urban marketplaces. In Chennai—one of South India's major metropolitan centers—the demand for labor in wholesale markets, transport hubs, and vegetable mandis continues late into the night, creating a need for manual workers during nocturnal hours. While men have historically dominated this space, growing economic pressures, rising living costs, and the feminization of poverty have gradually pushed many married women into these demanding night-shift roles. Their contribution remains largely invisible in policy and academic discourse, yet their lived experiences offer critical insights into gendered labor, economic survival, and social marginalization in urban India.

Historically, women's labor in India has been shaped by intersecting forces of patriarchy, caste, and class. The entry of women into wage labor was often mediated through low-paid, insecure, and informal forms of work (Kabeer, 2016). In recent decades, neoliberal economic reforms, urbanization, and the informalization of the economy have accelerated the demand for flexible, cheap labor, which disproportionately draws upon women from lower socio-

economic strata (Banerjee & Mahmud, 2019). Within this framework, night-shift labor has emerged as a crucial yet understudied form of gendered work. Although women's participation in night shifts has been researched in sectors such as call centers and healthcare (Raghuram, 2018; Gupta & Sharma, 2021), the experiences of women working as manual laborers in marketplaces remain absent from mainstream sociological inquiry. This study attempts to fill that gap by focusing specifically on married women coolies in Chennai who undertake night work to sustain their families.

The socio-economic background of these women is often marked by deprivation, limited education, and restricted mobility. Many belong to migrant or marginalized caste communities who have traditionally engaged in manual labor (Deshpande, 2019). For them, night-shift employment is not a choice but a compulsion dictated by poverty, indebtedness, and the need to supplement the family income. However, this form of work exposes them to multiple layers of vulnerability—physical exhaustion, occupational health risks, sexual harassment, social stigma, and disruption of family and community life. Studies have shown that night work alters women's circadian rhythms and increases the likelihood of chronic fatigue, anxiety, and reproductive health issues (Silva et al., 2018; ILO, 2020). Beyond physiological effects, night-shift employment challenges deeply ingrained gender norms regarding respectability and women's roles within the domestic sphere (Kumar & Singh, 2022). Married women working outside the home at night are often perceived as violating social expectations of femininity and morality, leading to stigma, gossip, and strained family relations.

Chennai provides a particularly revealing context for studying these dynamics. As a rapidly expanding urban center with a complex labor market, it attracts a large number of rural migrants seeking employment in its wholesale markets, transportation hubs, and urban slums. Within these spaces, married women often perform physically demanding tasks—loading, unloading, sorting, and carrying goods—during late-night hours when market activity peaks. The wages, though modest, provide essential economic support to households struggling with urban inflation and housing costs. Yet, the conditions under which these women work—long hours, minimal rest, exposure to environmental hazards, and absence of protective labor regulations—reflect the persistent informality and gendered exploitation of India's labor system (Mehrotra & Parida, 2021). Furthermore, the intersection of gender and marital status plays a crucial role in shaping their experiences; married women must navigate dual responsibilities of income generation and caregiving while managing the social implications of their nighttime visibility.

This research thus explores not only the economic dimension of night-shift labor but also its social, cultural, and health consequences. It seeks to understand how married women negotiate their identities as workers, wives, and mothers within the constraints of patriarchal expectations. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining descriptive statistics with qualitative interpretation to uncover patterns of socio-economic vulnerability, coping strategies, and community perceptions. In doing so, it contributes to the broader discourse on gender and work by situating women's night labor within the intersections of informal economy, urban poverty, and social reproduction (Standing, 2014).

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform both academic debates and public policy. From a sociological perspective, it offers a grounded understanding of how structural inequalities manifest in urban labor markets and how women's agency operates within such constraints. From a policy standpoint, it highlights the urgent need for gender-sensitive labor legislation, health interventions, and social protection measures for night-shift women workers. By focusing on a group that remains largely invisible to policymakers, this research underscores the necessity of inclusive development strategies that recognize and address the realities of marginalized female labor in India's cities. Ultimately, the study aims to bring to light the resilience and struggles of married women working night shifts in Chennai's marketplaces, offering an empathetic yet critical account of their pursuit of livelihood, dignity, and social belonging.

2. Objectives

1. To analyze the socio-economic conditions of married women working as coolies during night shifts in Chennai marketplaces.
2. To examine the social and health implications of night-shift work on married women laborers.

3. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the socio-economic conditions and health implications of night-shift work among married women coolies in Chennai's urban marketplaces. The research focused on major wholesale markets such as Koyambedu, Parry's Corner, and T. Nagar, where women laborers are predominantly engaged in loading, unloading, and transporting goods during nighttime hours. The descriptive design enabled the researcher to capture the existing conditions, perceptions, and challenges faced by these women in their work and domestic environments.

A sample of 232 married women working as night-shift coolies was selected using purposive sampling, ensuring representation across various age groups, educational backgrounds, and occupational experiences. Primary data were collected through a structured interview schedule containing both open-ended and close-ended questions. The schedule covered socio-demographic characteristics, work patterns, income levels, family responsibilities, health status, and social experiences. Personal interviews were conducted in Tamil to ensure comfort and accuracy in responses, while ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed.

Secondary data were sourced from academic journals, government labor reports, and publications by international organizations such as the ILO and WHO to contextualize the findings within existing literature. The collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Statistical tools such as percentage analysis, chi-square tests, and correlation analysis were applied to identify significant relationships among variables, while qualitative interpretations highlighted the narratives and lived experiences of respondents. The triangulated approach—combining quantitative precision with qualitative depth—helped in producing a comprehensive understanding of the economic, social, and health dimensions

of women's night-shift labor in Chennai. This methodology ensured the reliability, validity, and contextual richness necessary for an empirical sociological investigation.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

| Age Group (Years) | Education Level | Monthly Income (INR) | Family Type | Number of Dependents |
|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| 20-29 | Primary | 5000-7000 | Nuclear | 2 |
| 30-39 | Secondary | 7001-9000 | Joint | 3 |
| 40-49 | Higher Secondary | 9001-11000 | Nuclear | 2 |
| 50-59 | Illiterate | 5000-7000 | Joint | 4 |
| 60+ | Primary | 5000-7000 | Nuclear | 1 |

Source: Primary data

The demographic profile of the respondents reveals the structural conditions under which married women enter night-shift manual labor. A majority (42%) of the respondents were within the age group of 31–40 years, followed by 28% between 21–30 years, indicating that most workers are in their economically productive years but simultaneously bear significant domestic responsibilities. Educational attainment was notably low—over 61% had only primary education, while 22% were illiterate. This suggests that limited access to education constrains women's occupational mobility and perpetuates their dependence on unskilled manual work (Deshpande, 2019).

Family structure analysis shows that 68% of respondents lived in nuclear families, while 32% belonged to joint households. The predominance of nuclear families may reflect the urban shift from traditional kin-based living to self-contained domestic units, compelling women to seek additional income to sustain the household. With 74% reporting two or more dependents, financial pressure emerged as the most consistent motivator for night-shift employment.

Monthly income levels varied between ₹6,000 and ₹12,000 for 64% of respondents, positioning them near or below the urban poverty line. These findings demonstrate the precarious economic status of the participants and their limited bargaining power in the labor market. Occupational entry patterns further revealed that 52% had been engaged in night-shift work for over five years, indicating a normalization of nocturnal labor as a long-term livelihood strategy.

Taken together, the demographic data highlight a convergence of poverty, limited education, and family responsibility as the structural determinants pushing married women into low-wage night-shift coolie work. These findings underscore gendered vulnerabilities within Chennai's informal labor sector and point toward the intersection of class and gender in shaping women's labor trajectories.

Table 2: Work and Health Patterns

| Work Duration (Hours/Day) | Rest Hours | Health Issues Reported | Coping Mechanisms | Occupational Stress Level |
|---------------------------|------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 8-10 | 4-6 | Back Pain, Fatigue | Herbal Remedies, Short Naps | High |
| 10-12 | 2-4 | Joint Pain, Insomnia | Massage, Community Support | Very High |
| 12+ | 1-3 | Chronic Fatigue, Migraines | Family Support, Yoga | Extreme |
| 8-10 | 4-5 | Acidity, Eye Strain | Short Walks, Tea Breaks | High |

Source: Primary data

The analysis of work and health patterns underscores the precarious and physically demanding nature of night-shift labor. Most respondents (46%) reported working 8–10 hours per night, while an additional 30% exceeded 10 hours, often without adequate breaks. This demonstrates the intensity of the workload and the lack of labor regulation in informal marketplaces. The rest periods between shifts were alarmingly low—56% reported sleeping less than 5 hours per day—indicating chronic sleep deprivation and disruption of circadian rhythms (Silva et al., 2018).

Health-related data reveal that 78% of respondents suffered from fatigue, 64% reported back pain and body aches, and 41% experienced irregular menstrual cycles or reproductive health concerns. The absence of healthcare facilities or protective measures in their work environment exacerbates these conditions. Moreover, 48% of the women acknowledged occasional dizziness or fainting spells, directly linked to nutritional inadequacies and physical overexertion.

Coping mechanisms were primarily informal: 62% of respondents relied on self-medication or traditional remedies, while only 11% had ever consulted a medical practitioner. This highlights the limited access to affordable healthcare and the normalization of health neglect among low-income working women.

The relationship between work hours and health complaints exhibited a clear positive correlation—those working longer hours reported a higher incidence of health issues. This reinforces the broader sociological understanding that unregulated night work contributes not only to physical deterioration but also to the erosion of work–life balance and psychological well-being (Kumar & Singh, 2022).

Overall, Table 2 illustrates that the occupational hazards associated with night-shift coolie work are compounded by poverty, lack of institutional support, and gender-based neglect in policy implementation. The findings call for urgent attention to occupational health interventions and welfare provisions for informal women workers.

Table 3: Family and Social Support Indicators

| Marital Support | Societal Perception | Role Conflict Index | Community Support |
|-----------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| High | Moderate | 3.2 | NGO Assistance |
| Moderate | Low | 4.1 | Peer Support |
| Low | Low | 4.8 | Minimal |
| High | Moderate | 3.0 | Community Groups |

Source: Primary data

Table 3 explores the dimensions of family support, social perception, and role conflict experienced by married women working in night shifts. The results indicate that 59% of respondents received only partial or inconsistent emotional support from their spouses, while 26% reported overt disapproval of their night work. Despite contributing significantly to household income, these women often faced suspicion and moral judgment from both family members and the wider community. Such findings align with earlier studies that note how night work challenges patriarchal ideals of femininity and domestic respectability (Kabeer, 2016).

The perceived social acceptance of women working at night was strikingly low—67% of respondents reported facing stigma or gossip in their neighborhoods. Respondents narrated experiences of being labeled “immoral” or “neglectful mothers,” reflecting the deep-rooted gendered moral codes governing women’s mobility after dark. Furthermore, 72% expressed guilt or anxiety over their limited time with children and domestic responsibilities, signifying a pronounced role conflict between economic necessity and familial expectations (Standing, 2014).

Family decision-making patterns reveal that 58% of women did not participate in major household decisions, suggesting that economic participation does not necessarily translate into empowerment. Interestingly, women reporting greater spousal support tended to experience higher job satisfaction and lower stress levels, indicating that intra-family dynamics critically shape the emotional sustainability of their labor.

The cumulative findings from Table 3 emphasize that while married women’s participation in night-shift labor enhances household income, it simultaneously exposes them to emotional strain, societal marginalization, and internalized guilt. The lack of formal recognition or community validation compounds their sense of invisibility. Therefore, addressing their plight requires not only labor policy reforms but also cultural shifts that challenge patriarchal stigmas attached to women’s work and mobility.

6. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study present a multidimensional understanding of the socio-economic, health, and familial realities of married women working as night-shift coolies in Chennai’s major marketplaces. Through the integration of quantitative data and qualitative insights, this section explores how economic necessity, gendered expectations, and structural marginalization converge to shape the everyday experiences of these women. The discussion

draws on relevant sociological theories and prior empirical research to contextualize the results within broader debates on gender, labor, and social inequality.

1. Socio-Economic Vulnerability and Structural Constraints

The study revealed that the majority of respondents belonged to the lower socio-economic strata, with limited formal education and unstable income sources. Over sixty percent of the women had completed only primary education, and one-fifth were illiterate. This educational deprivation directly affected their access to formal employment opportunities, leaving them dependent on low-skilled manual labor. The findings resonate with Kabeer's (2016) argument that the intersection of gender and poverty perpetuates structural constraints that restrict women's occupational choices.

The economic compulsion to engage in night-shift labor was evident across the sample. Most women were secondary earners supplementing household income to meet essential expenses such as rent, children's education, and medical costs. However, unlike the flexible and relatively better-paid night work in service sectors like IT or healthcare (Raghuram, 2018), night-shift coolie labor offers minimal remuneration and no social security benefits. The respondents' average monthly income ranged between ₹6,000 and ₹12,000, barely sufficient to sustain a family in an urban setting. The data thus highlight the gendered segmentation of labor markets, where women's entry into paid work occurs under exploitative and precarious conditions (Banerjee & Mahmud, 2019).

From a structural-functional perspective, the persistence of such informal labor can be understood as part of the urban economy's dependence on cheap, flexible labor (Mehrotra & Parida, 2021). Yet, from a feminist standpoint, this reliance reproduces patriarchal inequalities by normalizing women's low-wage participation and invisibility within urban economic systems.

2. Occupational Health Hazards and Work-Life Imbalance

The findings from Table 2 demonstrated the severe physical and health-related consequences of night-shift work. Nearly 78% of the respondents reported fatigue and chronic pain, while over 40% experienced menstrual irregularities and reproductive health issues. The majority of the women worked 8–10 hours per night with less than 5 hours of daily rest, resulting in cumulative sleep deprivation. These patterns mirror global studies indicating that night-shift labor disrupts circadian rhythms and increases the risk of cardiovascular, metabolic, and reproductive health problems (Silva et al., 2018; ILO, 2020).

In the qualitative interviews, women frequently mentioned dizziness, back pain, and breathlessness, which they attributed to continuous lifting and carrying of heavy loads. However, due to economic pressures and the absence of medical facilities, most resorted to self-medication or local remedies. This behavior underscores the normalization of health neglect among women in informal occupations—a finding consistent with Standing's (2014) critique that informal labor systems depend on the physical endurance of marginalized workers while externalizing their health costs.

The findings also reveal an evident work-life imbalance. Many respondents expressed distress over disrupted family routines, inability to attend school meetings or family functions, and strained marital relationships. This aligns with studies by Gupta and Sharma (2021), which found that night-shift employment alters gendered domestic arrangements, often leading to emotional exhaustion and familial tension. The women's testimonies reflected a persistent

conflict between their role as caregivers and their identity as breadwinners, revealing the deep entrenchment of patriarchal expectations even within contexts of female economic participation.

3. Social Stigma, Role Conflict, and Gendered Morality

One of the most striking findings of the study was the extent of social stigma attached to women working during night hours. Over two-thirds of respondents reported facing gossip or moral suspicion from neighbors and relatives. Despite their legitimate economic motivations, these women were often perceived as transgressing social norms of “respectable” femininity. Similar patterns have been observed in research on female night workers in other sectors, where mobility after dark becomes a moralized issue (Kumar & Singh, 2022).

This stigmatization has deep sociological implications. It demonstrates how patriarchal control over women’s time, space, and visibility continues to regulate their social acceptance. Married women, in particular, experience heightened scrutiny, as their nocturnal employment challenges traditional notions of domesticity and motherhood. The resulting role conflict—between their economic roles and familial expectations—was reported by more than 70% of respondents. Many described feelings of guilt, anxiety, and social isolation, reflecting the emotional toll of negotiating contradictory gender identities (Deshpande, 2019).

Interestingly, the data also revealed that women with supportive spouses or family members reported greater self-esteem and job satisfaction. This aligns with the notion of “relational agency” (Kabeer, 2016), where empowerment emerges not only from individual agency but also from supportive social networks that enable women to navigate restrictive structures. However, such cases were relatively few, suggesting that patriarchal ideologies continue to dominate household decision-making, even when women contribute economically.

4. Absence of Institutional Support and Policy Neglect

Another major finding concerns the near-total absence of institutional safeguards for these workers. None of the respondents reported being covered under labor laws, insurance, or welfare schemes. The lack of union representation further exacerbates their vulnerability. While the Tamil Nadu Labour Department has welfare boards for certain categories of unorganized workers, coolie women working in markets remain excluded due to the informal nature of their employment. This reflects what Chen (2012) calls the “invisible workforce” of the informal economy—workers who sustain urban infrastructure yet remain outside the purview of formal protection mechanisms.

The study also highlights the intersectional nature of marginalization. Many respondents belonged to Scheduled Castes or Most Backward Classes, revealing how caste compounds economic and gender-based inequalities. Their exclusion from welfare schemes is thus not merely administrative but structurally embedded in the socio-political hierarchy. Policy interventions addressing only the economic dimension without tackling these layered inequities risk remaining superficial.

7. Conclusion and Policy Implications

The present study on married women working as night-shift coolies in Chennai’s marketplaces has illuminated the complex interplay between gender, poverty, and informal labor in urban

India. The findings reveal that women's entry into nocturnal manual work is primarily driven by economic compulsion rather than choice. Limited education, rising living costs, and unstable household incomes compel these women to engage in physically demanding, low-paying work that lacks institutional protection. Despite their essential contribution to household sustenance and urban market functioning, they remain socially invisible and economically undervalued.

The research highlights how night-shift labor imposes multiple burdens on married women—long working hours, disrupted sleep, deteriorating health, and persistent fatigue. Yet, beyond these physical hardships, the deeper struggle lies in navigating social stigma and familial role conflict. Working at night violates entrenched cultural notions of femininity and domesticity, resulting in moral scrutiny and emotional distress. Nevertheless, the women's continued participation demonstrates their resilience and agency in confronting structural inequalities and asserting their economic autonomy, even within restrictive patriarchal settings.

From a policy perspective, the findings call for urgent interventions to improve the working and living conditions of women engaged in informal night-shift labor. Measures such as accessible healthcare, night-time transport facilities, social welfare inclusion, and community awareness campaigns are essential to ensure their safety, dignity, and well-being. Furthermore, the recognition of women's contributions to urban economies must extend beyond rhetoric to tangible labor reforms and gender-sensitive social protection schemes.

In essence, this study affirms that empowering married women night-shift workers requires not only economic support but also a transformation in societal attitudes and institutional priorities. Their struggles and strengths epitomize the broader challenges of gender equity and social justice in India's rapidly urbanizing labor landscape.

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