

Digital Empowerment of Marginalised Women Workers: Pathways through Literacy and Skill Development

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Abstract

Marginalised women in the unorganised sector in India continue to face structural inequalities in education, healthcare and economic participation. This paper examines the transformative potential of digital literacy and skill development for empowering women tea plantation workers. The paper critically evaluates the intersections of gender, labour, law, and digital inclusion. It examines how digital interventions, ranging from financial literacy and telehealth to skill diversification and e-commerce, can strengthen women's bargaining power, improve health outcomes and enhance their autonomy. The paper also reviews policy frameworks, such as the Plantation Labour Act (1951), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Digital India initiative, assessing their role in shaping women's empowerment. Theoretical frameworks including Sen's capability approach, intersectionality and Information and Communication Technology for Development, are employed to interpret the findings. The study highlights challenges such as digital divides, patriarchal constraints and poor law enforcement, while identifying pathways for integrating digital literacy with social work practice and grassroots activism. The paper concludes that digital empowerment, when coupled with legislative enforcement and community-based interventions, can foster inclusive growth and sustainable development for marginalised women workers.

Keywords: Digital Literacy, Skill Development, Women Workers, Social Inclusion, Empowerment, Unorganised Sector

Women in the Unorganised Sector

Over 80% of Indian women's labour force involvement is in the unorganised sector, making it the country's largest employer [1]. This industry encompasses a diverse range of occupations, including construction, street vending, domestic services, agriculture and plantation work. Millions of women rely on it for their livelihoods, yet it is characterised by low pay, informality, instability and social insecurity. As a result of the combination of structural weaknesses in the labour market and gender inequality, women working in this sector frequently hold the most

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vulnerable and low-paying jobs [2]. Women are often employed as seasonal workers in agriculture, performing tasks such as planting, transplanting and harvesting. They are frequently classified as "helpers" rather than primary workers, despite their substantial contributions, which causes them to be excluded from social security programs and invisible in official statistics [3]. Similar to this, women are often employed in the construction industry as unskilled manual labourers who perform physically demanding tasks such as masonry assistance, cement mixing, and brick carrying. Due to their low pay and lack of workplace safety precautions, these positions put women at risk for frequent injuries and other health problems [1]. Due to its link with family responsibilities, domestic work, another significant source of employment for women in urban India remains underappreciated. Long hours, no contracts, unpaid payments, and susceptibility to abuse and harassment are just a few of the exploitative circumstances that domestic workers have to cope with [4].

Plantation labour is a particularly notable instance of gendered exploitation in the unorganised economy. Women, who comprise over half of the workforce, are crucial to the operation of tea plantations in Assam, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu [5]. Even though plucking tea is a demanding job that requires endurance, it is not given enough credit or compensation. Although their performance is often higher, studies reveal that women plantation workers earn significantly less money than men [6]. Many workers continue to receive less than the statutory minimum wage, and irregular payment practices exacerbate wage discrepancies. Women's vulnerability is further increased by the living and working conditions on plantations. Workers often live in unsanitary dwellings provided by estate owners, with limited access to sanitary facilities, clean water, and medical treatment. Due to low pay, food insecurity, and a lack of nutritional diversity, malnutrition is prevalent among female tea workers [7]. Poor mother and child health outcomes result from the underfunding and inadequate equipment of plantation healthcare units, which primarily ignore their reproductive health requirements [8]. Workers lack proper protection due to the lack of enforcement of the 1951 Plantation Labour Act, which was intended to regulate working conditions and provide welfare measures [9]. Due to the geographical isolation of plantation estates, women tea workers also have limited mobility, which restricts their access to markets, education and opportunities for skill development. This seclusion perpetuates cycles of intergenerational poverty and strengthens reliance on estate administration. The intersection of caste, ethnicity, and migratory status social hierarchies exacerbates gender marginalisation. Even though they are illegal, exploitative practices like wage deductions and bonded labour are nonetheless common [10].

The contradiction of high participation yet low recognition and rewards is reflected in the work of women in the unorganised economy, particularly on plantations. Despite being persistently undervalued, their labour supports vital sectors including tea, construction, and domestic services. More vigorous enforcement of labour laws, gender-responsive social protection measures, legal acknowledgement of women as workers and empowerment through literacy and skill development programs are all necessary to address these disparities. Women in the unorganised sector will continue to experience both social marginalisation and economic exploitation in the absence of such initiatives.

Policy Commitments and Ground Realities

To improve the welfare of women workers in the unorganised sector, particularly those engaged in plantations and other forms of informal labour, India has made several policy commitments. To protect the rights of plantation workers, laws such as the Plantation Labour Act (1951) were enacted, mandating the provision of housing, healthcare, sanitation, and welfare facilities. This law represents a significant step in the right direction towards controlling unfair labour practices. In reality, though, companies frequently overlook their legal responsibilities, resulting in poor compliance. According to studies, a large number of plantation workers continue to live in deteriorating homes without access to sanitary amenities, safe drinking water, or trustworthy medical treatment, highlighting the ongoing disconnect between law and enforcement [11]. India has ratified several international agreements that prioritise women empowerment and gender equality. States are required by the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to take proactive steps to end discrimination against women in all areas of life, including the workplace and social protection. A similar global agenda for advancing women's rights was outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), which emphasised the importance of expanding women's access to economic opportunities, decent jobs and decision-making institutions [12]. Although India has supported these frameworks, the ideas they promote often remain aspirational rather than revolutionary in the lives of women employed in tea plantations and other informal sectors [13].

Domestic programs, such as the National Skill Development Mission (2015) and the Digital India Mission (2015), have aimed to bridge the digital divide and foster inclusive growth in recent years. These programs underscore the importance of digital literacy, access to e-governance, and skills training as essential tools for enhancing employability and reducing inequality [14]. By providing digital tools to women in the unorganised sector, such programs can enhance their access to financial inclusion, healthcare, and job prospects, and have the potential to significantly improve their lives. Nonetheless, a disparity remains in how the goals of policies are translated into tangible benefits. The scope of these programs is nevertheless constrained by gendered digital divides, a lack of infrastructure in rural and plantation regions, and a lack of awareness among female workers [15].

Ultimately, the disparity between progressive legal frameworks and actual conditions on the ground reflects the structural difficulties in implementation and governance. The lived realities of marginalised women workers show enduring disparities, despite India's policy pledges being in line with national and international objectives of social inclusion and gender equality. To close these disparities, localised, community-based interventions that contextualise national policies to meet the unique needs of women in the unorganised sector are just as crucial as more robust enforcement mechanisms.

The Promise of Digital Empowerment

There are now more opportunities to address long-standing gender inequities in the unorganised sector, thanks to India's rapid growth in mobile phone usage, internet penetration, and digital platforms. By lowering barriers to opportunities, services, and information, digital

technologies can act as equalisers. According to researchers, digital literacy serves as a "gateway capability"empowering people to take charge of their lives and make more decisions [16]. This competence is essential for women workers in underserved areas because it provides them with access to basic services, including financial inclusion, healthcare, and education [17]. For example, mobile applications have made it easier for women to access telemedicine, maternal health advice, and government welfare entitlements without having to physically travel, which is often limited in rural and plantation settings; similarly, digital financial services like mobile banking and Unified Payments Interface (UPI) platforms give women more control over their income, which reduces their reliance on male household members or intermediaries [18]. Its transformative potential is amplified when digital literacy is coupled with structured skill development; training in e-commerce, digital marketing, and online entrepreneurial practices allows women to diversify their sources of income beyond traditional low-paying jobs [19]. Digital empowerment also extends beyond personal growth to support broader objectives of social inclusion, gender equality, and sustainable development by providing women with access to online networks and platforms that can enhance their collective bargaining power, enabling them to organise, voice their concerns and negotiate better working conditions.

Legal and Policy Framework

International Instruments

The primary tool for advancing gender equality on a global scale is still the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) [20]. CEDAW emphasizes women's right to equal participation in public life by requiring state parties, including India, to eliminate discrimination in employment, education, and access to technology. By highlighting women's access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a means of achieving empowerment and reducing poverty, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) further strengthened these pledges [21].

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global framework for advancing digital inclusion and gender equality. While SDG 8 emphasises decent work and productive employment for all, SDG 9 promotes innovation and increases access to ICT infrastructure. At the same time, SDG 5 seeks explicitly to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls [12]. These interconnected objectives highlight the importance of digital literacy and skills in achieving sustainable and equitable development. Furthermore, member states are required by the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) conventions, including Convention No. 111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) and Convention No. 122 on Employment Policy, to advance equal opportunities and eliminate systemic obstacles that affect female employees [22]. [23]. Digital skills are also recognised as crucial for enhancing employability and ensuring inclusive growth in the evolving workplace [24].

National Legislation and Policy Framework

At the national level, the values of empowerment, equality and nondiscrimination are enshrined in India's constitutional and legal framework. The 1950 Indian Constitution forbids sex-based

discrimination (Article 15), guarantees equality before the law (Article 14), and encourages equal opportunity in the workplace (Article 16). A comprehensive policy framework for enhancing women's access to education, skill development, and digital literacy is offered under the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001). By combining free educational materials, digital learning, and technology-enabled pedagogy, the National Education Policy 2020 represents a substantial change [25]. It encourages women to pursue lifelong learning and skill development (Ministry of Education, 2020). In addition, programs under the Skill India Mission, such as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) and the National Skill Development Policy (NSDP, 2015), aim to equip women with market-relevant skills, including ICT competencies [26].

The Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA), introduced in 2017, aims to make six crore rural households digitally literate, with a particular focus on women and marginalised groups. This initiative further prioritises digital inclusion [27]. With a focus on e-governance, digital infrastructure, and service delivery, Digital India (2015) provides a comprehensive policy framework for universal digital access, paving the way for women's empowerment in the digital realm.

Legal provisions further strengthen this ecosystem. For women to participate safely in the digital world, electronic transactions, digital signatures, and cybersecurity are enabled by the Information Technology Act 2000 and its subsequent amendments [28]. To address gender-based cyber risks, the recently enacted Digital Personal Data Protection Act (2023) establishes robust data protection safeguards that ensure privacy and security in digital interactions [29]. These national and international frameworks provide a solid foundation for promoting the digital empowerment of underrepresented female workers. By connecting gender equality, digital inclusion, and skill development as mutually reinforcing pillars of inclusive and sustainable growth, they align global norms with domestic aspirations.

Policy Gaps

Significant policy gaps still exist in addressing the particular circumstances faced by Indian women plantation workers, notwithstanding progressive labour and gender laws. Although they offer general protections, current frameworks like the Plantation Labour Act and gender equality legislation fall short in taking into consideration the confluence of class, gender, and occupational vulnerability that tea workers face. There are still a few poorly executed plantation-specific programs for women's health, economic development, and digital inclusion. Furthermore, national initiatives like Digital India frequently offer broad-based digital skilling programs that are not tailored to the socio-economic circumstances of rural or semi-literate women employed on plantations. This policy gap restricts women's access to digital and economic opportunities in regions such as the Northeast and Himachal Pradesh, where tea estates have a significant influence on local economies. Context-sensitive solutions that incorporate worker rights, gender, and digital empowerment are desperately needed in the plantation industry.

Women in Plantations: Structural Inequalities

For labour-intensive jobs like picking tea, the plantation economy relies heavily on women,

but their pay is often below subsistence levels. Low pay and exploitative working conditions keep plantation women "trapped in cycles of poverty" [30]. Many plantations lack the healthcare facilities required by the PLA, which contributes to high rates of chronic illnesses, maternal mortality, and malnutrition [31]. Women who work as tea workers frequently come from Dalit or Scheduled Tribe communities, which increases their vulnerabilities. Beyond the workplace, social exclusion restricts access to political and educational opportunities [32]. Even while working on a plantation pays, empowerment is rarely the result. Low pay encourages reliance rather than self-reliance. Cases of "social abandonment," in which female tea workers experience neglect and violence based on their gender [33].

Digital Literacy as Empowerment

Programs for digital literacy have shown considerable promise in rural areas. Millions of women have received internet and smartphone training thanks to programs like Internet Saathi, which has improved their access to health and financial information [34]. Digital literacy connects women to broader networks of opportunity and information, hence assisting them in overcoming isolation [17]. In Assam's tea estates, the Internet Roshni program established digital information centres where women with leadership training shared digital expertise which improved women's role in community decision-making while also boosting their self-esteem [35].

Skill Development and Livelihood Diversification

One of the most important routes to reducing plantation reliance is vocational training. Skill development increases women's employability and bargaining power [19]. Digital skills, such as digital payments, small-scale enterprises, and online craft marketing, increase the number of alternatives for a living [36]. However, there are still difficulties. There are few market connections because many training programs are supply-driven rather than demand-driven. If structural obstacles, such as social norms and limited financing availability, are not addressed, skill development may not lead to long-term empowerment.

Theoretical Perspectives

Three main theoretical frameworks—the Capability Approach, Intersectionality and the ICT Framework—can be used to analyse women's digital empowerment in plantation contexts. These frameworks provide different yet complementary perspectives on justice, access, and empowerment.

Capability Approach which emphasizes the importance of enhancing people's actual freedoms and opportunities to live the kind of life they value. For plantation women, digital literacy serves as a means to enhance their access to online services, including financial inclusion, healthcare information, and educational resources. Social workers empower women to engage in governance, make educated decisions, and overcome systemic obstacles that limit their agency by providing them with digital tools. Therefore, digital empowerment involves more than just technology; it also involves increasing freedoms and options within repressive socio-economic systems [37], [38].

Intersectionality theory emphasizes the lived experiences of plantation women are shaped by a

variety of intersecting identities, including gender, caste, ethnicity, and class. Initiatives for digital empowerment must be inclusive and context-sensitive, as these intersections exacerbate marginalisation. A one-size-fits-all policy runs the risk of leaving out the most disadvantaged women, who experience exacerbated discrimination in the workplace and in society [39].

Information and Communication Technologies for Development Framework emphasises that ICTs are not inherently empowering; rather their transformative potential is contingent upon sociocultural context, sustainability, usability, and accessibility. In plantation communities, where connectivity and literacy levels are low, technology must be integrated with social mobilisation initiatives and tailored to local conditions [40]. Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that infrastructure alone is insufficient for plantation women to benefit from digital technology truly. It requires a strategy that is inclusive, justice-focused, and holistic, one that changes both social structures and capabilities.

Role of Social Work Profession and Community-Based Interventions

Social Work Profession has become a key field in helping women plantation workers become more digitally empowered, especially in underserved and rural areas. Social workers have successfully bridged the gap between policy provisions and reality on the ground by employing participatory, community-based, and rights-oriented techniques. Community-led digital literacy programs on tea plantations have effectively integrated ICT instruction with knowledge of social programs, healthcare rights, financial inclusion, and labour rights [41]. This comprehensive strategy ensures that digital education is viewed as a catalyst for empowerment, rather than just a technical skill, enhancing women's ability to access information, advocate for their rights, and participate in political processes in a meaningful way.

Participation, empowerment, and social justice are the guiding concepts of social work practice in plantation communities [13]. Social workers lead focus groups, establish self-help groups, and create online learning communities where women share their lived experiences, identify community issues, and collaborate to develop locally relevant solutions. These participatory activities encourage women to become active agents of social change rather than passive recipients of charity. They participate more successfully in labour negotiations, community development projects, and organisational and domestic decision-making processes when equipped with digital tools [15].

NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) are essential to maintaining these empowering processes, frequently working in tandem with social workers. To obtain digital infrastructure, training materials, and mentorship after training, they collaborate with panchayats, local government agencies, and corporate parties. These partnerships strengthen the institutional support systems that enable digital literacy programs to be inclusive, scalable, and ongoing [19]. Additionally, social workers lobby for gender-sensitive policy changes by drawing attention to the interconnected vulnerabilities of women working on plantations, including low literacy, restricted mobility, and unpaid caregiving duties.

Social workers promote individual agency and group solidarity by integrating digital literacy and skill development into larger community organisation procedures. Beyond merely acquiring new skills, the results empower women with greater self-assurance, financial

independence, and a stronger voice in the political, social, and economic spheres. Therefore, among plantation workers, social work interventions in digital empowerment offer a revolutionary route to inclusive growth and sustained community development.

Discussion

For women who work on Indian plantations, digital empowerment has become a major driver of social justice and gender equality. It has the capacity to revolutionise social, health, and economic facets, while also addressing systemic obstacles stemming from sexism, poverty, and policy inequities. One of the most effective strategies for boosting women's economic independence is digital financial literacy. Plantation women now have more control over their income and spending thanks to e-wallets, microcredit, and mobile banking. Women who manage their own digital accounts are more involved in household decision-making, indicating a shift from reliance to independence [17]. Additionally, the implementation of digital payment systems has increased salary transparency and reduced exploitation by intermediaries. Additionally, women have been able to diversify their sources of income beyond plantation labour due to the development of digital skills. Women can participate in micro-enterprises, including tailoring, handicrafts, and small-scale retailing, thanks to online training programs, entrepreneurial platforms, and e-commerce exposure. This economic diversity increases household resilience and lessens susceptibility to income instability associated with plantations.

In plantation areas with limited medical infrastructure, women's health outcomes have also improved significantly due to access to digital technologies. Telemedicine, mobile health apps, and SMS-based awareness campaigns are examples of digital interventions that help close the distance between remote workers and healthcare providers. Digital platforms have significantly enhanced plantation women's knowledge of maternal health, their involvement in prenatal care, and vaccination coverage [31]. Additionally, taboos have been broken and preventative healthcare behaviours have been promoted thanks to internet ads that address mental health, menstrual cleanliness, and nutrition. In addition to increasing access to healthcare, teleconsultation and digital education have enabled women to make informed decisions about their own health and that of their families.

Digital inclusion fosters social empowerment that extends beyond individual gains to positively impact society as a whole. Plantation women are now able to interact, exchange stories, and organise for causes based on their rights thanks to social media, messaging apps, and community networks. Initiatives like Internet Roshni demonstrated how digital hubs facilitated grievance resolution, group discussions, and communication with plantation management [35]. Women's negotiating power has increased as a result of digital collectivism, which has enhanced working conditions and given their opinions more weight in decision-making processes. Digital platforms also serve as avenues for educating people about gender equality, government programs, and legal rights, which helps women workers feel more confident and empowered.

Despite these advancements, several obstacles still stand in the way of achieving complete digital empowerment. A significant digital divide still exists, as many women lack access to cellphones, reliable internet, or the literacy necessary to utilise digital technologies. Household

patriarchal traditions frequently limit women's freedom of movement and discourage their digital independence. Inadequate institutional support for digital skilling projects is caused by implementation gaps in current labour and gender legislation, particularly lack enforcement of the Plantation Labour Act (PLA). Furthermore, many programs have sustainability issues; their long-term impact is diminished by inadequate market connections, mentorship, and short-term training without follow-up.

A multifaceted approach that incorporates social work practice, community involvement, and policy commitment is necessary to get over these obstacles. Partnerships with NGOs and local governments, gender-sensitive training models, and customised digital literacy initiatives can ensure that digital empowerment leads to lasting social change. To achieve transformative empowerment—where women acquire not only skills but also agency, dignity, and equality in all areas of life—digital inclusion in plantations must ultimately extend beyond simply providing access to technology.

Future directions

To ensure inclusive skill development, future initiatives should focus on incorporating digital literacy modules into plantation welfare programs. Training women to be "digital ambassadors" can foster peer learning and sustainability while fostering community leadership. Measuring long-term effects and improving tactics will be made easier by extending studies beyond planted regions. The focus of social work practice should be on rights-based, participatory strategies that combine digital education and advocacy. Furthermore, developing mobile-based grievance channels can ensure the practical application of the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) and enhance accountability.

Conclusion

For marginalised women workers in India's plantation industry, digital empowerment via literacy and skill development offers a revolutionary route. Digital interventions enhance individual autonomy and group agency by addressing gaps in healthcare, education, and economic engagement. However, empowerment cannot be accomplished alone; it needs to be strengthened by inclusive policy frameworks, grassroots activities, and effective law enforcement. Digital literacy for women tea workers is about recovering opportunity, rights, and dignity, not just about using technology. Digital empowerment can open the door to sustainable development and inclusive growth when combined with social work interventions and structural changes.

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