

Working Environmental Constraint Factors of Informal Workers in Mega Development Projects in Kerala, India: An Exploratory Factor Analysis

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Abstract

The informal workforce plays a dominant role in the labour market structure of developing economies, particularly in India. Despite their substantial contribution to infrastructure and mega-development projects, informal workers continue to experience severe working environmental constraints, employment insecurity, inadequate social protection, and poor occupational conditions. The present study attempts to identify and analyse the major working environmental constraint factors affecting informal workers engaged in mega-development projects in Ernakulam district, Kerala. Using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), the study clusters different dimensions of working environmental constraints and examines their underlying relationships. The analysis was conducted through Principal Component Analysis with Promax rotation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity confirmed the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The study extracted six major factors namely Employability Factors, Economic Factors, Labour Market Factors, External Factors, Work Factors, and Organisational Factors, which together explained 89.471 per cent of the total variance. The findings reveal that irregular wages, absence of decent employment benefits, insecure employment conditions, weak labour regulations, poor occupational safety measures, and social exclusion remain the major constraints faced by informal workers. The study concludes that comprehensive labour reforms, improved social security measures, enhanced occupational safety standards, and inclusive labour market policies are essential for improving the quality of work and overall job satisfaction of informal workers engaged in mega-development projects.

Keywords: Informal workers, working environment, exploratory factor analysis, mega-development projects, labour market, employability, occupational safety.

1. Introduction

The informal sector constitutes one of the most significant sources of employment generation in developing countries. In India, a substantial proportion of workers are engaged in informal employment without adequate access to social security, labour rights, employment benefits, or safe working conditions. Informal workers contribute immensely to the completion of large-scale infrastructure and mega-development projects such as metro rail construction, highway development, port expansion, smart city projects, and urban infrastructure initiatives. Despite their critical contribution to economic

development, these workers continue to remain economically vulnerable and socially excluded. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022) estimates that more than 80 per cent of India's workforce is engaged in the informal sector, contributing nearly 50 per cent to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The unorganized or informal sector refers to labour and production activities carried out in unincorporated and often unregistered small enterprises [1]. The concept of the informal sector was first introduced by Keith Hart (1973) [2], who differentiated between wage employment and self-employed entrepreneurial activities. Although the formal sector has expanded in many developing economies, the informal sector has continued to grow and absorb a large share of the labour force. India is recognized for its extensive informal economy, which not only supports employment generation but also contributes significantly to national economic activity.

According to Murthy [3], employment in the unorganized sector increased to 86.8 per cent during the period from 2011–12 to 2017–18, with nearly 83 per cent of the workforce employed in informal occupations. Roy and Kundu [4] observed that the Indian labour market is predominantly characterized by informal employment, which has expanded considerably following economic reforms. Informal employment in India is highly heterogeneous and includes three major categories: (i) self-employed workers, (ii) workers employed within informal enterprises, and (iii) informal workers employed within formal enterprises [5].

Informal workers often experience precarious employment conditions characterized by low wages, lack of job security, absence of social security benefits, and weak legal protection [1]. Workplaces in the informal sector generally operate outside effective regulatory supervision, leading to inadequate occupational safety standards and exposure to hazardous working conditions [4]. Furthermore, informal workers frequently lack access to healthcare facilities and welfare schemes, which intensifies their economic and social vulnerability [6].

The International Labour Organization (ILO) consistently emphasizes that the informal economy is associated with “decent work deficits,” including insecure employment, wage exploitation, poor working environments, absence of social protection, and lack of legal recognition. Informal workers engaged in mega-development projects often face long working hours, hazardous work environments, irregular wage payments, inadequate safety provisions, and limited organizational support. These conditions adversely affect workers' physical health, psychological wellbeing, productivity, and job satisfaction.

Occupational health issues in the informal sector are diverse and include musculoskeletal disorders, respiratory illnesses, injuries, and stress-related health problems. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) [7], a substantial proportion of workers globally are employed in occupations and enterprises that fail to comply with international labour standards. Informal sector workplaces in India frequently expose workers to unsafe environments that contribute to severe health complications. Prolonged work durations, repetitive physical tasks, and poor ergonomic conditions often result in musculoskeletal disorders and lower back pain [8, 9]. Studies on workers engaged in brick-making, quarrying, and other labour-intensive occupations reveal a high prevalence of occupational injuries and posture-related disorders [10].

Among various occupational health concerns, respiratory diseases require special attention due to their long-term impact on workers' quality of life and productivity. Informal sector workers are frequently exposed to dust, fumes, smoke, silica particles, and airborne contaminants in workplaces such as brickfields, stone crushing units, jute mills, quarries, and construction sites. Continuous exposure to such

pollutants significantly increases the risk of chronic respiratory diseases, asthma, bronchitis, and reduced lung function [11, 12]. Research conducted across developing countries, including India, demonstrates the adverse effects of industrial dust exposure on workers engaged in stone crushing, brick-making, and other labour-intensive industries [13]. Occupational respiratory impairment resulting from prolonged dust exposure has become a major public health concern due to its contribution to morbidity and mortality among industrial workers [14, 15].

The Indian informal sector exhibits considerable diversity in terms of size, structure, and sectoral distribution. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2022), approximately 83 per cent of India's workforce, representing nearly 390 million workers, remains engaged in informal employment. Agriculture accounts for the largest share of informal workers, followed by services and manufacturing sectors. Construction, transportation, retail trade, and household services constitute major areas of informal employment in urban regions. Regional variations are also significant, with states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh exhibiting higher levels of informality compared to Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Recent economic and policy developments have significantly affected the informal sector in India. The demonetization policy of 2016 and the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017 created substantial disruptions for cash-dependent informal enterprises. Studies indicated severe declines in income and employment among small informal businesses during this period. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the extreme vulnerability of informal workers. During the national lockdown, a large proportion of informal workers experienced severe income losses, unemployment, and reverse migration to rural areas. Although recovery has occurred gradually, informal workers continue to face employment instability and financial insecurity. At the same time, digital transformation and formalization initiatives such as the e-Shram portal have attempted to improve labour registration and welfare accessibility among informal workers.

The academic discourse on informality has evolved considerably over time. Early scholars such as Lewis (1954) [16] and Hart (1973) [10] viewed informality as a transitional phase that would gradually disappear with economic development. However, subsequent studies demonstrated the persistence and expansion of informal employment despite modernization and industrial growth (Chen, 2012). The dualist perspective considers the informal sector as a marginalized segment disconnected from the formal economy (Fields, 2004), whereas the structuralist perspective views informal employment as closely linked to formal enterprises through subcontracting and labour exploitation (Portes et al., 1989) [24]. The legalist perspective, associated with de Soto (1989), attributes informality to excessive government regulations, while the voluntarist approach (Maloney, 2004) [17] argues that some workers voluntarily choose informal employment to avoid taxation and regulation. Recent studies increasingly emphasize the heterogeneity of the informal economy and the coexistence of both survival-oriented and growth-oriented informal enterprises (Chen, 2012; Kanbur, 2017; LaPorta and Shleifer, 2014).

Several empirical studies have examined the socio-economic and occupational conditions of informal workers in developing countries. The ILO (1991) identified employment insecurity, low wages, lack of social protection, and weak labour rights as defining characteristics of informal employment. Chen (2012) emphasized that informal workers experience multidimensional vulnerabilities, including occupational risks, unstable employment, and limited bargaining power. Breman (2013) argued that informal labour arrangements intensify exploitation through contractual employment systems and weak labour law enforcement.

In India, the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) reported that informal workers often suffer from unsafe working conditions, low income, and inadequate access to social protection measures. Studies on migrant labourers in construction and infrastructure projects have highlighted major issues such as irregular wages, poor housing conditions, lack of healthcare facilities, and weak institutional support. Research conducted in Kerala also indicates increasing dependence on migrant and informal labour in infrastructure projects despite the state's relatively advanced social development achievements.

In Kerala, particularly in Ernakulam district, the rapid expansion of mega-development and infrastructure projects has accelerated urbanization and economic growth. Simultaneously, these projects have increased the dependence on informal labour, including migrant workers, casual labourers, and contractual employees. Although Kerala is recognized for its relatively better social development indicators, informal workers in infrastructure projects continue to experience employment insecurity, unsafe work conditions, labour market discrimination, and inadequate access to welfare benefits. The growing contractualisation and casualisation of labour have further intensified social and economic vulnerabilities among informal workers.

Although numerous studies have examined informal employment and occupational vulnerability, limited empirical research has systematically analysed the underlying dimensions of working environmental constraints among informal workers engaged in mega-development projects using advanced multivariate statistical techniques. Therefore, the present study attempts to address this research gap by employing Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to identify and classify the major working environmental constraint factors affecting informal workers in mega-development projects.

2. Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the study are:

1. To identify the major working environmental constraint factors affecting informal workers in mega-development projects.
2. To classify the different dimensions of working environmental constraints using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA).
3. To analyse the relationship between employment conditions, labour market factors, organizational support, and work environment among informal workers.
4. To provide policy suggestions for improving the working environment and job satisfaction of informal workers.

3. Review of Literature

Theoretical perspectives on informality have evolved significantly over time. Lewis (1954) and Hart (1973) viewed the informal sector as a temporary phenomenon associated with underdevelopment. However, later studies established that informality continues to persist even in rapidly growing economies (Chen, 2012). The dualist approach explains informal employment as a marginalized segment disconnected from the formal economy (Fields, 2004), while the structuralist perspective considers informal labour as integrated into capitalist production systems through subcontracting and labour exploitation (Portes et al., 1989). The legalist school led by de Soto (1989) attributes informality to excessive regulations and bureaucratic barriers, whereas the voluntarist perspective (Maloney, 2004) argues that workers may voluntarily remain informal to avoid regulatory costs.

Recent literature increasingly emphasizes the heterogeneity of informal employment. Chen (2012) and Kanbur (2017) distinguished between survival-oriented informal activities and growth-oriented enterprises with higher productivity levels. In the Indian context, scholars such as Harriss-White (2003) and Kannan (2009) highlighted the interaction between informality and social structures including caste, gender, and regional disparities. Studies by Mehrotra (2019) and Srivastava (2020) further examined the effects of economic reforms and the COVID-19 pandemic on India's informal workforce.

The ILO (1991) identified employment insecurity, low wages, lack of social security, and absence of labour rights as major characteristics of informal employment. Chen (2012) emphasized that informal workers face multidimensional vulnerabilities such as occupational hazards, unstable employment, weak bargaining power, and exclusion from labour market institutions. Breman (2013) argued that contractual labour arrangements intensify worker exploitation and weaken labour protections.

Studies conducted by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) revealed that informal workers in India suffer from low income, unsafe working conditions, and limited access to social protection schemes. Research on migrant labourers in construction and infrastructure sectors indicated serious concerns related to irregular wages, poor housing conditions, lack of healthcare facilities, and inadequate occupational safety measures.

Occupational health studies have shown that informal workers are highly exposed to hazardous working conditions. Research conducted among workers in brickfields, quarries, stone crushing units, and jute mills revealed high incidences of musculoskeletal disorders, respiratory illnesses, and occupational injuries. Prolonged exposure to dust, silica particles, smoke, and airborne pollutants has been identified as a major cause of chronic respiratory diseases among informal workers.

Studies in Kerala also highlighted the increasing dependence on migrant and informal labour in infrastructure and mega-development projects. Despite Kerala's relatively advanced social development indicators, informal workers continue to face labour market discrimination, employment insecurity, and inadequate welfare support. However, very few studies have systematically examined the multidimensional working environmental constraints experienced by informal workers in mega-development projects using statistical techniques such as Exploratory Factor Analysis.

Therefore, the present study attempts to bridge this research gap by identifying and classifying the major working environmental constraint factors affecting informal workers engaged in mega-development projects in Ernakulam district, Kerala.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Nature and Source of Data

The present study is primarily based on primary data collected from informal workers employed in mega-development projects in Ernakulam district, Kerala. The respondents included casual labourers, migrant workers, contractual employees, and other categories of informal workers engaged in infrastructure-related activities.

4.2 Sampling Technique

The study adopted a structured sampling procedure to collect data from respondents working in selected mega-development projects. A structured interview schedule was used for data collection.

4.3 Analytical Tools

The study employed Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using Principal Component Analysis with Promax rotation to identify the underlying dimensions of working environmental constraints. Factor

analysis is a multivariate statistical technique used to reduce a large number of interrelated variables into a smaller set of meaningful factors.

The suitability of the sample for factor analysis was tested using:

- Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy
- Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity

5. Reliability and Validity Analysis

The reliability and validity of the selected variables were tested before conducting factor analysis.

Table 1
KMO and Bartlett’s Test

Test	Value
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.944
Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity – Approx. Chi-Square	26285.841
Degrees of Freedom	630
Significance Level	0.000

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value of 0.944 indicates a very high level of sampling adequacy, confirming that the data are suitable for factor analysis. Generally, KMO values above 0.90 are considered excellent for conducting factor analysis.

Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity produced a significant value of 0.000, indicating that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix. This confirms the existence of significant correlations among the variables and justifies the application of factor analysis.

Thus, both statistical tests confirmed the reliability and appropriateness of the selected variables for Exploratory Factor Analysis.

6. Exploratory Factor Analysis of Working Environmental Constraint Factors

The present study identified six major factors influencing the working environment of informal workers engaged in mega-development projects. The factors were extracted using Principal Component Analysis with Promax rotation.

The six extracted factors together explained 89.471 per cent of the total variance, indicating that the identified factors effectively explain the working environmental constraints experienced by informal workers.

Table 2
Exploratory Factor Analysis of Working Environmental Constraint Factors

Factors	Components	Rotated Factor Loadings
Factor 1: Employability Factors (36.386%)	Little access of regular wage/salary	0.982
	Gender-based discrimination	0.981
	Absence of decent employment benefits	0.980
	Little knowledge about technological change	0.979
	No voice in labour market	0.979

Factors	Components	Rotated Factor Loadings
	policies	
	Absence of provisions for compensation	0.978
	Inflow of migration	0.970
	Lack of skill-intensive products	0.967
	Absence of occupational safety and health	0.961
Factor 2: Economic Factors (22.670%)	Irregular base wage/salary	0.971
	No measuring experience	0.967
	High living cost	0.961
	No co-worker relations	0.958
	Heavy workload	0.812
	Esteemed poverty	0.778
	Absence of government services and regulation	0.768
	No written contract/agreement	0.704
	Little access to employment benefits	0.603
Factor 3: Labour Market Factors (9.284%)	Irregular time of work	0.985
	Less workplace commute factors	0.983
	Less employment standards	0.978
	Low-level effectiveness of organization	0.978
	Absence of leadership engagement	0.976
	Not allowed to join trade union	0.970
	Limited knowledge of technology	0.950
Factor 4: External Factors (8.677%)	Lack of political influence	0.983
	Social-cultural intervention	0.982
	Social laws and rules	0.979
	No provision for environmental pollution	0.977
Factor 5: Work Factors (6.450%)	No provision for safety interventions	0.955
	No provision for hygienic issues	0.950
	No provision for psychosocial hazards	0.934
	No provision for recreational facilities	0.932
	Unpaid leave	0.924

Factors	Components	Rotated Factor Loadings
	Absence of provisions for compensation	0.922
	Limited access to environmental standards	0.918
Factor 6: Organisational Factors (6.005%)	Dismissed without advance notice	0.880
	Limited access to social/legal protection	0.879
	Insecure nature of employment	0.864
	Labour laws violated by employers	0.861
	Less involvement of co-workers	0.859
	Unpaid workers' compensation	0.858
	No provision for physical and mental health	0.857

Total Variance Explained : 89.471%

7. Discussion of Findings

7.1 Employability Factors

The first factor extracted from the analysis was identified as “Employability Factors,” explaining 36.386 per cent of the total variance. This factor emerged as the most influential dimension affecting informal workers in mega-development projects.

The variables included under this factor mainly represent labour market exclusion, inadequate employment opportunities, technological disadvantages, and discrimination. The highest factor loading was observed for “Little access of regular wage/salary” (0.982), indicating that irregular and unstable income remains the most significant issue faced by informal workers.

Gender-based discrimination also emerged as a significant constraint, reflecting unequal treatment of women workers in terms of wages, job opportunities, and employment benefits. Similarly, the absence of decent employment benefits and limited knowledge regarding technological changes reveal the vulnerable position of informal workers in a rapidly modernizing labour market.

The absence of occupational safety and health provisions further indicates the unsafe and hazardous nature of work environments in mega-development projects.

7.2 Economic Factors

The second factor, namely “Economic Factors,” explained 22.670 per cent of the total variance. The factor includes irregular wages, high living costs, absence of employment benefits, heavy workload, and poverty.

The highest loading was observed for irregular base wage/salary (0.971), highlighting the economic instability experienced by workers. The absence of written contracts and inadequate government regulation indicate weak labour governance mechanisms in the informal sector.

The increasing cost of living, particularly in urban areas like Ernakulam, intensifies the economic vulnerability of workers employed in mega-development projects. Heavy workload and poor workplace relationships further contribute to occupational stress and reduced job satisfaction.

7.3 Labour Market Factors

The third factor was identified as “Labour Market Factors,” accounting for 9.284 per cent of the total variance. This factor includes irregular working hours, low employment standards, ineffective organizational systems, and restrictions on trade union participation.

Irregular time of work recorded the highest loading (0.985), indicating the absence of standardized working hours in informal employment. Workers often experience long and unpredictable work schedules without overtime benefits.

The restriction on trade union participation reflects the lack of collective bargaining mechanisms among informal workers. This weakens workers’ negotiating power and limits their ability to demand fair wages and better working conditions.

7.4 External Factors

The fourth factor, termed “External Factors,” explained 8.677 per cent of the total variance. This factor consists of political influence, socio-cultural interventions, social laws, and environmental pollution.

The findings indicate that informal workers are significantly affected by external socio-political conditions. The lack of political influence reduces workers’ participation in policy-making processes related to labour rights and welfare.

Environmental pollution and inadequate environmental protection measures further increase the vulnerability of workers engaged in construction and infrastructure activities.

7.5 Work Factors

The fifth factor, labelled “Work Factors,” explained 6.450 per cent of the total variance. This factor mainly includes safety interventions, hygienic conditions, psychosocial hazards, recreational facilities, unpaid leave, and environmental standards.

The absence of safety interventions emerged as a major concern, indicating poor occupational health and safety practices in mega-development projects. Workers are often exposed to hazardous conditions without proper protective equipment or safety training.

The lack of hygienic facilities and psychosocial support negatively affects workers’ physical and mental wellbeing. Unpaid leave and absence of compensation mechanisms further increase employment insecurity.

7.6 Organisational Factors

The sixth factor identified was “Organisational Factors,” contributing 6.005 per cent of the total variance. This factor includes insecure employment, labour law violations, lack of legal protection, and poor worker representation.

Workers reported frequent dismissal without advance notice, highlighting the precarious nature of informal employment. Limited access to legal protection and violation of labour laws by employers indicate weak institutional support mechanisms.

The absence of physical and mental health provisions also reflects the neglect of worker welfare in organizational management systems.

8. Major Findings of the Study

The major findings derived from the exploratory factor analysis are summarized below:

1. Six major factors influencing the working environment of informal workers were identified through Exploratory Factor Analysis.

2. The six extracted factors explained 89.471 per cent of the total variance, indicating strong explanatory power.
3. Employability Factors emerged as the most influential dimension, explaining 36.386 per cent of the variance.
4. Irregular wages, absence of employment benefits, insecure employment, and lack of occupational safety measures were identified as the most severe constraints.
5. Labour market exclusion, gender discrimination, and lack of trade union participation significantly affect the working conditions of informal workers.
6. Economic vulnerability and rising living costs intensify employment insecurity among informal workers.
7. Poor workplace safety measures and absence of psychosocial support negatively affect workers' physical and mental health.
8. Weak labour regulations and inadequate organizational support mechanisms contribute to exploitation and labour rights violations.

9. Policy Suggestions

Based on the findings of the study, the following policy suggestions are proposed:

9.1 Strengthening Labour Regulations

Government authorities should strengthen labour inspection systems and ensure strict implementation of labour laws in mega-development projects. Employers violating labour standards should be subjected to legal action.

9.2 Ensuring Social Security Protection

Comprehensive social security schemes should be introduced for informal workers, including health insurance, pension benefits, accident compensation, and paid leave.

9.3 Improving Occupational Safety and Health

Mandatory occupational safety standards should be implemented in all mega-development projects. Employers must provide safety equipment, health facilities, and safety training programs.

9.4 Promoting Skill Development

Skill development and technological training programs should be organized to improve workers' employability and adaptability to changing labour market conditions.

9.5 Encouraging Trade Union Participation

Informal workers should be encouraged and legally permitted to join trade unions and workers' associations to strengthen collective bargaining mechanisms.

9.6 Strengthening Welfare Measures

Employers and government agencies should provide hygienic living conditions, recreational facilities, healthcare services, and psychological counselling support for workers.

10. Conclusion

The study clearly demonstrates that informal workers engaged in mega-development projects experience multiple dimensions of working environmental constraints. The Exploratory Factor Analysis identified six major factors affecting workers' employment conditions and overall wellbeing, namely Employability Factors, Economic Factors, Labour Market Factors, External Factors, Work Factors, and Organisational Factors.

The findings reveal that irregular wages, absence of decent employment benefits, insecure employment conditions, labour law violations, and poor occupational safety standards continue to dominate the work environment of informal workers. These challenges not only reduce workers' productivity and job satisfaction but also increase their socio-economic vulnerability.

The study further highlights the urgent need for comprehensive labour reforms and inclusive policy interventions to improve the quality of work and social protection of informal workers. Effective implementation of labour laws, occupational safety measures, social security schemes, and organizational support systems can significantly improve the living and working conditions of informal workers in mega-development projects.

Thus, the study concludes that improving the working environment of informal workers is essential not only for ensuring decent work but also for achieving sustainable and inclusive economic development.

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