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BRIDGING THE GAP? A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WAGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS FOR WOMEN CASHEW WORKERS ACROSS PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

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Abstract

The cashew nut processing industry is a major segment of India's food processing industry and gives employment to a large number of rural women from the lowest social strata. This study assesses the wage structure and working conditions of women cashew workers in processing units in Kollam district and compares the quality of the working environment provided by the public and private sectors. A wide disparity exists in the wages paid in the two sectors. The public wage premium and public wage deficit theories are used to analyse the wage differences and their impact on the working conditions of women workers in private sector units. A work condition index (WCI) is constructed to compare working conditions. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire from 401 women workers (116 public, 285 private) in 2024. Public sector workers earn significantly higher daily wages (Rs. 353.84 vs Rs. 339.52), and the sectors differ significantly in workplace problems, accidents, closures, grievance mechanisms and benefits. On average, private sector workers report a marginally higher WCI (0.397 vs 0.395), but the difference is not statistically significant, and the overall index is below 0.4 in both sectors, indicating unsatisfactory conditions.

Keywords: *cashew processing, public wage premium, public wage deficit, work condition index, and women cashew workers.*

Introduction

The cashew processing industry is one of the most labour-intensive, agro-based export sectors in India and plays a pivotal role in the rural economy. Historically concentrated in Kerala particularly Kollam, the "*Cashew Capital of the World*", Tamil Nadu and coastal Karnataka, it relies overwhelmingly on female labour. In Kollam district alone, more than 2.5 lakh persons, about 10 percent of the district's population, are directly

involved in the industry, of whom 95 percent are women (Ratheesh, 2005). Women form 80 to 90 percent of the workforce nationally, mostly in vulnerable manual tasks such as shelling, peeling and grading. The industry has long offered rural and marginalised women economic independence & social empowerment, but it is also fraught with systemic labour problems.

In Kerala, the industry is organised in two regimes: the public sector, represented by state-backed bodies such as the Kerala State Cashew Development Corporation (KSCDC) and CAPEX, and the fragmented private sector, comprising registered factories, small subcontracted units and informal home-based set-ups. The public sector generally adheres to statutory regulations, collective bargaining and formal employment frameworks, with registered workers entitled to standard wages, Dearness Allowance (DA), Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) and Employees' State Insurance (ESI). The private sector, driven by competition, profit maximisation and global price fluctuations, frequently resorts to the flexibilisation of labour: temporary workers (*thundukar*), informal subcontracting and evasion of minimum wage revisions.

Statement of the problem

Despite the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 and the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, women cashew workers face severe economic precarity. Recent wage revisions by the Industrial Relations Committee (IRC) in Kerala have tried to standardise basic wages across both sectors, yet an implementation gap persists. Private operators cite rising raw material import costs and mechanised competition from countries such as Vietnam to justify lower wages, irregular working days or sudden closures. The physical conditions are also hazardous: shelling exposes women to corrosive Cashew Nut Shell Liquid (CNSL), causing dermatological damage, while prolonged sitting leads to chronic musculoskeletal disorders. How far these vulnerabilities are mitigated depends on whether a worker is employed in the protected public sector or the unregulated private sector.

Rationale of the Study

Although extensive literature exists on unorganised women labour in India, comparative empirical research on

how the public-private divide shapes the daily realities of cashew workers is scarce. This study compares wage structures, benefits, occupational health standards and overall working conditions across the two sectors, to give actionable insights to policymakers, trade unions and human rights advocates working for gender justice in this traditional industry.

Objectives of the Study

- To look into the wage structure and working conditions of women cashew workers in Kerala.
- To examine the wage differences and working conditions among women cashew workers of public and private sector units.

Hypotheses of the Study

Guided by the public wage premium and deficit theories and by earlier studies, the following null hypotheses (H0) are tested against their alternatives at the 5 percent level of significance:

- **H1:** There is no significant difference in the average daily wage of women cashew workers between the public and private sectors.
- **H2:** There is no significant difference in the average daily wage among the categories of work (grading, peeling, shelling).
- **H3:** There is no significant interaction effect of sector and category of work on the daily wage.
- **H4:** Workplace problems (verbal abuse, working during ill-health), the availability of a complaint redressal mechanism, workplace accidents and long-term factory closure are independent of the sector.
- **H5:** There is no significant difference between the sectors in the relations between management and labour unions.
- **H6:** There is no significant difference in the Work Condition Index (WCI) between public and private sector workers.
- **H7:** There is no significant difference in the WCI among the categories of work, overall and within sectors.

Review of Related Literature

Studies on minimum wages, working days and living conditions in the industry are summarised below. *Beevi* (1976) examined the effect of minimum wage legislation on cashew workers in Kerala and found that

average daily wages rose after minimum wages were fixed, but average annual earnings fell because many units shifted to Tamil Nadu, reducing the number of working days in Kerala. *Kannan* (1978) noted that a Minimum Wages Advisory Committee was appointed after the formation of Kerala, recommending revision of the 1953 minimum wage, a DA, a guaranteed daily minimum for piece-rate workers and strict enforcement of labour laws (Government of Kerala, 1959); even so, actual payment remained below the prescribed minimum. *James* (1981) identified insufficient working days and employer exploitation as the main problems and pointed out that DA was paid only if the management's minimum daily output was reached. The *High Level Committee on Industry* (1984) observed that organised labour and minimum wage legislation had not ensured a reasonable wage or continuity of employment; KSCDC had not achieved its social purpose, providing work to only 22,000 workers for 100 days a year at high cost, and the committee concluded that, since the industry needs no high technology, there was no advantage in factory-scale organisation and that household-sector organisation would be more advantageous to manufacturers and workers.

Theoretical Framework

A wide disparity exists between the wages paid in the public and private sectors. Public sector wages can be higher or lower than private sector wages for workers with similar characteristics and skills.

***Public wage premium*:** to the extent that the public sector is motivated by political considerations rather than profit maximisation, its wages depend on the ability of public sector workers to compete over the allocation and size of the public budget (Gunderson, 1979, 1989; Mueller, 1998).

Public wage deficit: public employees may receive lower wages because they enjoy other pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits such as job security, longer holidays and generous pensions (Bellante and Link, 1981; Moore and Raisian, 1991).

Private wage deficit: private sector wages are determined by the profit-maximising behaviour of enterprises (Gunderson, 1979). Public-private differentials thus arise from profit maximisation, differences in wage-setting mechanisms, trade unionism, the relative size of the public sector

and government equity policies. All these theories help to analyse the wage differences and their impact on the working conditions of women workers in private units.

Methodology of the Study

The study uses primary and secondary data. Secondary data were drawn from KSCDC, CAPEX, Kerala Cashew Board Ltd., the Cashew Export Promotion Council of India (CEPCI), the Directorate of Cashew Nut and Cocoa Development (DCCD), the Kerala State Cashew Workers' Relief and Welfare Fund Board, various issues of the Economic Review (Kerala State Planning Board) and journals and working papers. Primary data were collected from women workers of public and private units in Kollam district. Of the 541 processing units in Kollam, 32 are public and 509 private (Kerala Cashew Board Ltd.). Fifty units (14 public, 36 private) were selected by systematic sampling from 10 blocks. Of the 36,740 women workers engaged in shelling, peeling and grading, 11,756 work in public and 24,984 in private units. The sample size, computed at a 5% margin of error, 50% population proportion and 95% confidence level, is 401 workers (116 public, 285 private).

Besides tables, diagrams, averages and dispersion, the t-test, Chi-square, F-test and ANOVA tests, correlation and regression were used. Principal component factor analysis was applied to socio-economic conditions, wage differences, working conditions and health hazards. A Work Condition Index (WCI) with values between 0 and 1 was developed, and differences in the index among categories of work and sectors were tested with ANOVA. Multiple regression was used to identify factors determining satisfaction and working conditions.

Wage Structure and Working Conditions in Kerala

Cashew processing is highly labour intensive, with workers mostly women from economically and socially disadvantaged groups. The public sector provides on average about 150 days of work a year against about 220 days in the private sector. Most public sector workers are casual and do not get regular work through the month; average daily earnings are around Rs. 350 in the public and Rs. 320 in the private sector, but the private sector offers more days of work. In both sectors 93% of women are engaged in shelling, peeling and grading. Shelling and peeling workers are paid piece

rates, while graders receive a daily wage with DA. Under the Kerala Gazette notification of 21 February 2015, the minimum piece rate is Rs. 36.19/kg for shelling and Rs. 46.03/kg for peeling, and graders get Rs. 285/day plus admissible DA. Workers who get the maximum man-days of work earn the highest annual returns.

Working conditions are regulated through the Minimum Wages Act, the Factories Act and the Kerala Cashew Workers' Relief and Welfare Fund Act. The statutory standards are:

- **Wages and employment security:** a minimum of 160 working days a year; wages revised periodically on Consumer Price Index numbers; equal pay for equal work with piece or time rates by task; employer and employee contributions to the Welfare Fund for medical, educational and maternity benefits.
- **Hours and leave:** a maximum of 8-9 hours a day and 48 hours a week, with statutory rest intervals.
- **Occupational health:** gloves and protective gear against CNSL burns; adequate ventilation, lighting, sanitation and drinking water.
- **Social security:** medical and maternity benefits, relief wages during non-working periods and pensions for those above 60 through the Welfare Fund.

Wage Differences among Women Cashew Workers

Table 1 gives the average daily wage by sector from the 2024 primary survey. The private sector mean is Rs. 339.52 (SD 22.86; range 220-390) and the public sector mean Rs. 353.84 (SD 29.88; range 150-380). The independent samples t-test ($t = -5.180$, $p = 0.000$) shows that public sector workers earn significantly more per day.

Table 1. Average Daily Wage of Women Cashew Workers by Sector (Rs.)

Sector	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
Private	285	339.52	22.86	1.35	220.0	390.0
Public	116	353.84	29.88	2.77	150.0	380.0
Total	401	343.66	25.89	1.29	150.0	390.0
t-test	t (399) = -5.180, p = 0.000					

Source: Primary Survey, 2024

Table 2 shows the wage by category of work. Shelling workers earn the most (Rs. 349), followed by peeling (Rs. 342) and grading (Rs. 336). Shelling has the widest range (Rs. 150-380), peeling Rs. 220-390 and grading Rs. 230-350.

Table 2. Average Daily Wage by Category of Work (Rs.)

Category	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
Grading	58	336.21	23.90	3.14	230.0	350.0
Peeling	212	342.23	24.93	1.71	220.0	390.0
Shelling	131	349.29	27.25	2.38	150.0	380.0
Total	401	343.66	25.89	1.29	150.0	390.0

Source: Primary Survey, 2024

Table 3 combines sector and type of work. In the private sector, shelling pays the most (Rs. 352.53), against Rs. 333.94 for peeling and Rs. 332.31 for grading. In the public sector, peeling pays the most (Rs. 365.87), against Rs. 344.21 for grading and Rs. 342.43 for shelling, with a very high dispersion in shelling (SD 41.16). The two-way ANOVA shows significant effects of sector ($F = 15.237$, $p = 0.000$), category of work ($F = 4.881$, $p = 0.008$) and their interaction ($F = 27.432$, $p = 0.000$), meaning that the sector effect depends on the type of work. The adjusted R-squared of 0.192 shows that sector and category of work explain about 19.2% of the variance in wages.

Table 3. Average Daily Wages by Sector and Type of Work, with Two-way ANOVA

Sector	Category	Mean	Std. Dev.	N	Std. Error
Private	Grading	332.31	22.53	39	3.727
	Peeling	333.94	23.07	157	1.857
	Shelling	352.53	16.57	89	2.467
	Total	339.52	22.86	285	
Public	Grading	344.21	25.24	19	5.340
	Peeling	365.87	11.06	55	3.138
	Shelling	342.43	41.16	42	3.591
	Total	353.84	29.88	116	

ANOVA source	Type III SS	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	54057.03	5	10811.41	19.958	.000
Sector (A)	8253.76	1	8253.76	15.237	.000
Category of Work (B)	5287.75	2	2643.88	4.881	.008
A x B	29720.02	2	14860.01	27.432	.000
Error	213970.52	395	541.70		
Corrected Total	268027.55	400			

Source: Primary Survey, 2024. Dependent variable: wage per day (Rs.).
R-squared = .202 (adjusted .192)

The null hypotheses of no difference in wages between sectors and among categories of work are therefore rejected. The higher public sector wage is consistent with the public wage premium theory: wages there are influenced by factors beyond profit maximisation, such as political considerations and competition over the budget, and by institutional features such as pay regulation, unionisation and collective bargaining coverage. Public sector workers are generally more unionised (Lucifora and Meurs, 2006), and the premium is attributed to stronger union presence and bargaining power.

Working Conditions in Public and Private Sectors

Facilities at the workplace

The survey compares the percentage of workers reporting various facilities. The values reported in the text are summarised in Table 4. Cleanliness was reported by 95.4% (private) and 98.3% (public), proper ventilation by 89.8% and 69.0%, sufficient lighting by 84.9% and 73.3%, and sufficient toilets by 72.6% and 84.5%. Drinking water was reported by only 34.4% of private against 61.2% of public workers. Rest rooms, washing facilities, space for breastfeeding and day-care were generally more available in the public sector. First aid was available to 11.2% of private but only 1.7% of public workers.

Table 4. Selected Facilities at the Workplace (%of workers reporting)

Facility	Private	Public
Cleanliness maintained	95.4	98.3
Proper ventilation	89.8	69.0
Sufficient lighting	84.9	73.3
Sufficient toilets/latrines	72.6	84.5
Drinking water	34.4	61.2
First aid facility	11.2	1.7

Source: Primary Survey, 2024

Problems, grievance redressal, accidents and closures

Table 5 shows that verbal abuse is the most common problem, reported by 69.8% of private and 52.6% of public workers, and 24.9% of private sector workers had to work during ill-health against 0.9% in the public sector. Both differences are significant at the 1% level. Physical abuse (1.1% and 0.9%) and sexual harassment (0.4% and 0.9%) were reported by very few. Interventions to ensure a safe and supportive environment are essential.

Table 5. Problems Faced by Workers at the Workplace

Problem	Private N	Private %	Public N (%)	Total N (%)
Verbal abuse***	199	69.8	61 (52.6)	260 (64.8)
Physical abuse	3	1.1	1 (0.9)	4 (1.0)
Sexual harassment	1	0.4	1 (0.9)	2 (0.5)
Worked during ill-health***	71	24.9	1 (0.9)	72 (18.0)
Total respondents	285		116	401

*Source: Primary Survey, 2024. *** Chi-square significant at 1% level*

Table 6 shows that a complaint redressal mechanism is absent in 98.6% of private and 93.1% of public units. Although the sector difference is significant (Chi-square = 8.569, df = 1, p = 0.003), the near-universal absence of grievance mechanisms is the real concern, as such mechanisms are crucial for welfare, transparency and accountability.

Table 6. Complaint Redressal Mechanism in the Factories

Status	Private N	Private %	Public N (%)	Total N (%)
Not available	281	98.6	108 (93.1)	389 (97.0)
Available	4	1.4	8 (6.9)	12 (3.0)
Total	285	100.0	116 (100.0)	401 (100.0)
Chi-square	Value = 8.569, df = 1, p = 0.003			

Source: Primary Survey, 2024

Table 7 shows accidents: 12.9% of public against only 0.4% of private sector workers reported accidents (Chi-square = 34.060, p = 0.000), so the likelihood of an accident is about 12.93% in the public sector against 0.35% in the private sector. This calls for stricter safety protocols, particularly in public units.

Table 7. Number of Accidents in Workplace

Status	Private N	Private %	Public N (%)	Total N (%)	Total %
No accidents	284	99.6	101 (87.1)	385 (96.0)	96.0
Accidents	1	0.4	15 (12.9)	16 (4.0)	4.0
Total	285	100.0	116 (100.0)	401	
Chi-square	Value = 34.060, df = 1, p = 0.000				

Source: Primary Survey, 2024

Table 8 shows that 99.6% of private factories had not been closed for a long period against 89.7% of public factories; 10.3% of public units were closed for an extended time against 0.4% of private units. The Chi-square test (p = 0.000) shows a significant association between sector and closure, with closures more prevalent in the public sector. Among respondents affected by closures, 84.6% received salary or compensation and 15.4% did not.

Table 8. Factories Closed for Long Periods

Status	Private N	Private %	Public N (%)	Total N (%)	Total %
Not closed	284	99.6	104 (89.7)	388 (96.8)	96.8
Closed	1	0.4	12 (10.3)	13 (3.2)	3.2
Total	285	100.0	116 (100.0)	401	
Chi-square	Value = 26.251, df = 1, p = 0.000				

Source: Primary Survey, 2024

Management & labour-union relations

Table 9 shows mean relation scores of 2.496 (SD 0.497) in the private and 2.164 (SD 0.646) in the public sector. The difference is significant (t = 5.543, p = 0.000), so labour-management relations are perceived differently in the two sectors and the difference is unlikely to be due to chance.

Table 9. Average Relations between Management and Labour Unions

Sector	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
Private	285	2.496	.497	.029	1.40	5.00
Public	116	2.164	.646	.060	1.00	4.80
Total	401	2.400	.564	.028	1.00	5.00
t-test	t (399) = 5.543, p = 0.000					

Source: Primary Survey, 2024

Service Benefits Received by Women Cashew Workers

Table 10 shows that ESI and PF are the most common benefits: 82.11% and 69.47% of private and 81.9% and 57.76% of public sector workers receive them. Gratuity (29.31% vs 0.70%), DA (43.97% vs 15.79%), bonus (28.45% vs 14.04%) and pension (30.17% vs 17.54%) are much more prevalent in the public sector. Leave benefits and medical/health insurance are rarely provided in either sector, with minimal differences.

Table 10 Service Benefits Received by Cashew Workers

Benefit	Private N	Private %	Public N	Public %	Total %
ESI	234	82.11	95	81.90	82.04
PF	198	69.47	67	57.76	66.08
Gratuity	2	0.70	34	29.31	8.98
Dearness Allowance	45	15.79	51	43.97	23.94
Bonus	40	14.04	33	28.45	18.20
Pension	50	17.54	35	30.17	21.20
Casual leave	1	0.35	3	2.59	1.00
Earned leave	0	0.00	1	0.86	0.25
Hospital leave	1	0.35	2	1.72	0.75
Compensation leave	0	0.00	1	0.86	0.25
Maternity leave	0	0.00	2	1.72	0.50
Medical/health insurance	1	0.35	1	0.86	0.50
Total workers	285		116		401

Source: Primary Survey, 2024.

Work Condition Index of Women Cashew Workers

The WCI combines parameters on wages, facilities, workplace problems, grievance redressal, accidents, closures, relations with management, perceptions of safety, compensation, support, career growth, work-life balance and job satisfaction, overtime, wage card, service benefits and health problems (Table 11). Binary items are coded 0/1 and perception items are converted from a 5-point scale to a 0-1 range. A value close to 1 indicates good conditions (higher wages, facilities, no problems or accidents, working redressal, positive perceptions, benefits, no overtime or health problems); a value close to 0 indicates poor conditions.

The parameters are interpreted as follows:

- **Wage per day:** whether the wage is below or above a threshold (0 for below, 1 for above).
- **Workplace facilities:** availability of amenities and resources at the workplace (0 for no, 1 for yes).
- **Workplace problems:** specific problems in the work environment, such as verbal abuse, physical abuse, sexual harassment and working during ill-health, coded in the same binary way.
- **Complaint redressal mechanism, accidents and long-time closing:** existence of a grievance mechanism, occurrence of accidents and instances of prolonged closure of the unit, each coded as a binary variable.
- **Relationship to management, perceptions of safety, compensation, support, career growth and work-life balance, and job satisfaction:** qualitative assessments converted to a standardised 5-point scale.
- **Overtime, wage card, service benefits and health problem:** whether workers do overtime, receive a wage card, receive benefits such as health insurance and leave, and experience health problems, using binary coding.

Table 11. Work Condition Index - Parameters and Coding

Parameter	Sub-variables	Coding
Wage per day	1	Below = 0, Above = 1
Workplace facilities	12	No = 0, Yes = 1
Workplace problems	5	Yes = 0, No = 1
Complaint redressal mechanism	1	No = 0, Yes = 1
Workplace accidents; long-time closing	1 each	Yes = 0, No = 1
Relationship to management	-	5-point scale converted to 1
Safety; Compensation; Support	18; 11; 11	5-point scale converted to 1
Career growth; Work-life balance; Job satisfaction	6; 3; 1	5-point scale converted to 1
Overtime work; Health problem	1 each	Yes = 0, No = 1
Wage card; Service benefits	1; 12	No = 0, Yes = 1

Source: Author's definition. Close to 1 = good work condition; close to 0 = bad work condition.

Table 12 shows that the private sector has a slightly higher mean WCI (0.397) than the public sector (0.395), but the t-test (t = 0.338, p = 0.735) shows no significant difference. By type of work, grading has a slightly higher mean (0.405) than peeling (0.397) and shelling (0.391), but the ANOVA (F = 0.970, p = 0.380) is not significant. All values are below 0.4, so the overall working conditions of women cashew workers are not satisfactory, calling for more effective intervention by government and policymakers.

Table 12. Work Condition Index of Women Cashew Workers

Variable	Group	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	Test
Sector	Private	285	.3970	.0499	.0030	t (399) = 0.338, p = 0.735
	Public	116	.3946	.0894	.0083	
	Total	401	.3963	.0638	.0032	

Type of work	Grading	58	.4054	.0895	.0118	F (2, 398) = 0.970, p = 0.380
	Peeling	212	.3968	.0624	.0043	
	Shelling	131	.3915	.0513	.0045	

Source: Primary Survey, 2024

Table 13 breaks the index down by sector and type of work. In the private sector, grading has the highest index (0.454), then shelling (0.395) and peeling (0.384). In the public sector, peeling is highest (0.433), then shelling (0.385) and grading (0.306). Private grading (0.454) is far better than public grading (0.306); public peeling (0.433) is better than private peeling (0.384); shelling is almost equal (0.395 private, 0.385 public). The contrast test shows significant differences among the categories of work within sectors (F = 6.781, p = 0.001), so the null hypothesis of no difference in work condition among categories of work, once sector is taken into account, is rejected.

Table 13. Work Condition Index by Sector-wise Work Categories

Sector	Category	Mean	Std. Error	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Private	Grading	.454	.009	.436	.471
	Peeling	.384	.004	.375	.393
	Shelling	.395	.006	.383	.406
Public	Grading	.306	.013	.281	.331
	Peeling	.433	.008	.418	.448
	Shelling	.385	.009	.368	.402
Contrast	SS = .043, df = 2	MS = .021	F = 6.781	Sig. = .001	Error: SS 1.240, df 395

Source: Primary Survey, 2024

- **Grading:** private 0.454 against public 0.306, so conditions for graders are substantially better in private units.
- **Peeling:** private 0.384 against public 0.433, suggesting relatively better conditions for peelers in the public sector.

- **Shelling:** private 0.395 against public 0.385, a marginal difference in favour of the private sector.

Thus, the private sector shows higher indices for grading and shelling, while the public sector shows better conditions for peeling. These nuanced differences can inform strategies to improve conditions and worker well-being in both sectors.

Table 14. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

S.No.	Null hypothesis (H0)	Test and result	Decision	Inference
H1	No wage difference between sectors	t = -5.180, p = 0.000	Rejected	Public wage higher by about Rs. 14
H2	No wage difference among categories of work	F = 4.881, p = 0.008	Rejected	Shelling highest, grading lowest
H3	No sector x category interaction	F = 27.432, p = 0.000	Rejected	Sector effect depends on type of work
H4	Problems, redressal, accidents and closures independent of sector	Chi-square: verbal abuse and ill-health work (1% level); redressal 8.569, p = 0.003; accidents 34.060; closure 26.251 (p = 0.000)	Rejected (physical abuse and harassment too few for inference)	Private: more abuse and work during ill-health; public: more accidents and closures
H5	No difference in management-union relations	t = 5.543, p = 0.000	Rejected	Relations scored lower in public sector
H6	No difference in WCI between sectors	t = 0.338, p = 0.735	Not rejected	Conditions equally poor in both
H7	No difference in WCI among categories of work	Overall F = 0.970, p = 0.380; sector-wise contrast F = 6.781, p = 0.001	Not rejected overall; rejected within sectors	Differences emerge only by sector and task

Findings of the Study

Wages: The mean daily wage is Rs. 353.84 in the public and Rs. 339.52 in the private sector, a significant gap that supports the public wage premium theory and is attributed to unionisation, collective bargaining and political considerations. Shelling pays the most overall (Rs. 349.29) and grading the least (Rs. 336.21). The effect of sector depends on the type of work: private shelling is best paid, while public peeling is best paid.

Employment days: The private sector gives about 220 working days against about 150 in the public sector, which offsets part of the public wage premium in annual earnings. The statutory minimum is 160 days.

Facilities: The public sector is better on drinking water (61.2% vs 34.4%) and toilets (84.5% vs 72.6%), whereas the private sector is better on ventilation (89.8% vs 69.0%) and lighting (84.9% vs 73.3%). First aid is available to very few (11.2% private, 1.7% public).

Workplace problems: Verbal abuse is widespread (64.8% overall), more in the private sector (69.8% vs 52.6%). A quarter (24.9%) of private sector workers had to work when ill, against 0.9% in the public sector. Physical abuse and sexual harassment were rarely reported.

Grievance redressal: A complaint redressal mechanism is absent for 97% of workers (98.6% private, 93.1% public).

Accidents and closures: The public sector records far more accidents (12.9% vs 0.4%) and long factory closures (10.3% vs 0.4%); 84.6% of workers affected by closures received compensation, 15.4% did not.

Labour-management relations: The mean relation score is significantly lower in the public sector (2.164) than in the private sector (2.496).

Benefits: ESI (82%) and PF (66%) reach most workers in both sectors, but gratuity, DA, bonus and pension are far more common in the public sector. Leave and health insurance are almost absent in both.

Work Condition Index: The WCI is 0.397 (private) and 0.395 (public), with no significant sector difference, and every group is below 0.4, so overall conditions are unsatisfactory. Private grading (0.454) and public peeling (0.433) are the best conditions; public grading (0.306) is the worst.

Interpretation of the study

The findings indicate that the public-private divide shapes the wages and benefits of women cashew workers more clearly than it shapes their overall working conditions. The significant public sector wage advantage (Rs. 353.84 against Rs. 339.52; H1 rejected) and the sector-by-work-category interaction (H3 rejected) show that the size of the gap depends on the task performed, while the near-identical Work Condition Index in the two sectors (0.395 and 0.397; H6 not rejected) shows that a wage advantage and better benefits do not by themselves translate into better conditions overall. This pattern is consistent with the public wage premium theory (Gunderson, 1979; Mueller, 1998) and with the finding that public sector workers are more unionised (Lucifora and Meurs, 2006), and it agrees with earlier studies that daily wages and annual earnings can diverge because of the number of working days (Beevi, 1976; James, 1981) and that wage regulation and organised labour have not secured continuity of employment (High Level Committee on Industry, 1984). The shorter working year in the public sector (about 150 days against about 220 in the private sector) is a possible reason why the higher daily wage need not mean higher annual earnings, and the greater prevalence of verbal abuse, work during ill-health and weaker facilities such as drinking water in private units may reflect the flexibilisation and weaker enforcement that characterise the private sector, although the present data cannot confirm these mechanisms. The higher reported accidents and closures in the public sector may reflect real differences in risk, but they may also reflect better recording and reporting in formal units, a possibility that needs further checking. The near-universal absence of grievance mechanisms (97% of workers) and the very low availability of first aid, leave and health insurance help explain why the index remains below 0.4 in both sectors. Because the study is a cross-sectional comparison of association, these explanations are offered as plausible interpretations and not as proof of cause and effect. The practical significance is that wage-focused measures alone will not improve the conditions of women cashew workers: policy should also address employment days, grievance cells, first aid, protective gear, and social security coverage for private sector workers,

with task-specific attention to groups with the poorest conditions, such as public sector graders (0.306).

Discussion

The results bear directly on the two wage theories that frame the study. The public wage premium is evident in the daily wage, but the public wage deficit explanation, in which lower pay is traded for other pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits, finds no support here: public sector workers earn more per day and also receive gratuity, Dearness Allowance, bonus and pension far more often than private sector workers. What the premium does not buy is a better working environment. The Work Condition Index is almost identical in the two sectors (0.395 and 0.397) because their advantages and disadvantages offset each other, with private units weaker on verbal abuse, work during ill-health, drinking water and benefits, and public units weaker on accidents, closures, ventilation, lighting and first aid. The premium is also narrower than it appears once working days are considered, since the private sector offers about 220 days a year against about 150 in the public sector, so the daily gap of about Rs. 14 may not carry through to annual earnings. For policy, this suggests that bringing basic wage rates closer together, which the Industrial Relations Committee revisions aim at, is not sufficient; the deficits shared by both sectors in grievance redressal, first aid, leave, health insurance and number of working days are where improvement is most needed. The study is limited by its cross-sectional design, its single district and its reliance on worker-reported measures, so the findings describe associations among women cashew workers in Kollam in 2024 and should not be generalised to the industry as a whole.

Conclusion

The study examined wage differentials, working conditions and service benefits of women cashew workers in the public and private sectors of Kollam district. Wages are higher in the public sector, in line with the public wage premium theory and attributable to unionisation and political considerations, but the public sector also provides fewer working days. The sectors differ on specific aspects: the private sector scores worse on verbal abuse, working during ill-health, drinking water and benefits, while the public sector records more accidents and closures. Yet the

composite Work Condition Index shows no significant difference, and its low level (below 0.4) in both sectors shows that the working conditions of women cashew workers are poor. The absence of grievance mechanisms, low wages, late payments, health problems, and weak access to leave and health insurance call for urgent intervention by government, trade unions and policymakers: strict enforcement of minimum wages and the guaranteed 160 working days, protective gear and first aid, grievance cells in every unit and extension of social security to private sector workers. The analysis underscores the influence of working conditions on the socio-economic status of women workers and the need to improve them.

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